Sunsunsun

Illustrated by

Momoco

9

Alya Sometimes Hides Her Feelings in Russian

Fan TL

Alya
Sometimes Hides Her
Feelings in
Russian
Fan TL

“Masachika-sama...”

"DID YOU ONLY SEE ME AS SOME PITIFUL VICTIM THIS ENTIRE TIME!?"

THAT'S
NOT TRUE AT
ALLLLLLL!

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Alya Sometimes Hides Her Feelings In Russian Volume 9 Fan Translation

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Prologue - Even So, Yuki Was Still A Child

It hurts.

"**C-cough!**"

The moment Yuki regained consciousness on the bed, a cough immediately welled up from deep down in her chest, forcing its way out. She continued to cough repeatedly, with each one accompanied by a burning pain that stung her throat, and a sharp, pounding ache to the back of her head.

She reflexively curled up in an attempt to endure the pain, but even the slightest of movements made her joints ache all over. And when she managed to turn to her side, fighting the pain, her shoulder and arm, now under the weight of her body, began creaking in agony, leaving her with no choice but to return to lying on her back.

But alas, that only made it feel like her lungs were being crushed from above, rendering it difficult to breathe.

Ah, this feeling…

As her groggy mind, dulled by feverish sleep, began to clear, memories from the past resurfaced.

Bedridden, unable to go anywhere. Pain with no end in sight. The feelings of being trapped with suffocating despair, as if wandering aimlessly in some waterlogged cave without a map. Not knowing the slightest hint of when the water might rise and make it hard to breathe again, but stuck with the fear from knowing that it *will* inevitably happen.

No matter how much she struggled, no matter how much she cried in anguish, there was no escaping it.

How much longer would she have to tread the water to be freed from this hopeless situation? Was there *even* an exit at all? Imagining such a dire future made her feel like she was losing her mind in panic.

No… if I start having trouble breathing again, then…

She closed her eyes, taking a slow, deep breath. Just inhaling was enough for her to feel the blood drain from her fingertips. *It's cold. I feel lonely*. She wanted someone—anyone—to reach out and hold her hand.

And yet, no one was there.

Why… I understand Ayano and Mother… But Natsu-san should be here…

Surely, she must have just stepped out for a moment. Yuki also knew that if she used the phone right beside her, someone in the house would come rushing to her side in less than a minute.

But she didn't do that.

It wasn't because the fever had clouded her judgment. *Rather… Why isn't anyone by my side?*

Why did they leave her all alone to endure this pain? She couldn't believe it. She hated them all.

They should see her cry and be tormented by guilt and sadness.

It was childish resentment. A mix of anger, bitterness, fear, pain, and loneliness.

"*Uuu, waaaaah~"*

Yuki ignored the pain in her throat and cried like a child. But all it did was make her breathing even more erratic, and the increased lack of oxygen made her brain even more foggy.

"*Hic… huff, wahhh~*"

And before long, her thoughts were scattered all over the place. She didn't even understand why she was crying anymore.

Was she crying because she was sad? Or was she sad because she was crying?

Her anger had vanished long ago, leaving only a cold loneliness and a crushing anxiety.

How long would this suffering last? When would she even be able to leave this bed? What if she stayed like this forever? No, she didn't want that. She wanted to play with her brother. She wanted to continue teasing Ayano. She hated being hurt. *It hurts. It's lonely. I'm scared. I'm scared. I'm scared!*

"*Waaaah~ Hic, waaaaah~*"

Right at that moment, the door to her room opened with a click, and two familiar voices reached Yuki's ears.

"Yuki-sama!? What happened?"

"Yuki-sama…"

It was Natsu Kimishima, a servant to the Suou family, and her granddaughter Ayano, who served as Yuki's attendant.

"Does it hurt somewhere? Did you have a bad dream?"

Natsu hurriedly set down the tray she was holding, almost dropping it in her rush to get to the bed. Grasping Yuki's hand, she reached out to touch Yuki's cheek with concern—only for Yuki to shake her head and refuse her touch.

"Are you okay, Yuki-sama? Is there anything I should bring you!?"

This time, Ayano called out to her in an unusually panicked voice, but Yuki ignored her, continuing to cry.

She didn't understand why. Everything hurt and pain *should* be the reason, but she knew that *wasn't* why she was crying. Yet, she didn't understand the *true* reason as to why she was crying.

Not knowing, she could only keep crying, as if rejecting everything.

"Ayano! Call the doctor!"

"Y-yes!"

"It's okay, Yuki-sama. The doctor will be here soon," Natsu explained, but the meaning of her words were lost on Yuki.

"*Hic, uuuu~*. N-nii… sama…"

At the sound of that small, tearful murmur, Natsu froze.

“Nii-sama, onii-sama… *uwaaaaah~*”

Was she truly asking for help from her brother? Or was it just a spiteful attempt to trouble Natsu with an impossible request?

“*Waaah… Hic, nii-sa—Onii-chaaan, waaaah~*”

Unable to tell even that, Yuki continued to cry.

Chapter 1 - And Everything Became Thighs

“In the end… I couldn’t do anything for Yuki,” Masachika confessed, his voice quietly stirring up the cold air that encompassed the park at night.

He couldn’t make her feel better, he couldn’t give her freedom, and he couldn’t continue being the dependable brother that she needed. And what made it hurt the most was that, despite having such a pitiful and unreliable older brother, his little sister, who was born frail and weak, had grown into a girl so strong and resilient.

“I ran away, you know? I ran away from being her brother.”

He couldn’t stand it. She was so dazzling, so bright that he couldn’t bear to look at her directly.

“But… even though I’m a pathetic brother, she was kind to me.”

Yuki confronted her older brother who had turned away from her head-on. She had done so by playing the silly otaku little sister, blowing away all his guilt with her laughter.

“She clung to me like an idiot, and always gave me her affection with her words and actions…”

To an outsider, it might have seemed like Yuki was the one relying on Masachika, but reality disagreed.

“And I… I just kept relying on her kindness…”

It was the complete other way around. The one being spoiled, the one who was *truly* being saved, was actually Masachika all along.

Pampering his little sister allowed him to free himself from all his guilt. Indulging her whims allowed him to masquerade as a dependable, amazing older brother again. But deep down… he always knew the truth.

He could always feel the cold gaze of Masachika Suou. The gaze of his former self, before he lost his way, staring at him with a detached expression.

He could hear him say, *"How can you smile so easily? You've sacrificed your sister's life for this, you know?"* It was the voice of his younger self, before he had changed the way he spoke.

And he had always laughed it off, pretending not to notice it. But deep down, he despised himself for it.

"I'm just some worthless scumbag that's wasting his life away at the expense of Yuki's—my little sister's life… That's all there is to me… Masachika Kuze."

No excuse he could've made would distort the truth. It was a fact. And even now, when his sister was *genuinely* in need of his help, his legs just wouldn't move…

What had he meant by his most dearest? That she was the most important person in the world to him? In the end, all Masachika cared about was himself. How could he dare to speak of love and importance?

Oh, I see…

It was only then that Masachika realized the real reason he couldn't return Maria's feelings.

Was it his lack of confidence? Was it because romance was vague, and that love could change so easily? No. That wasn't it. The fact that his parents were divorced was just a convenient excuse to fall back on. He already knew that those two shared an unbreakable bond, a deep connection. So, it wasn't that…

I just…

…Simply couldn't believe in the strength of his own feelings.

Despite claiming to have loved the girl from his childhood, his first love, this whole time, he couldn't even *recognize* her when they'd reunited. And despite saying his little sister, Yuki, was important, he'd abandoned her for his own comfort.

Compared to the love he received—the love *they* showed him—his own feelings of love were shallow and flimsy.

Filled with immense disappointment and self-hatred, Masachika covered his face with both hands and squeezed out a pained voice from his aching chest.

“I have nothing… *nothing* I can be proud of… Who I’m now is just a worthless piece of trash…”

He even felt sick at the way he was basking in self-pity. He had no right to seek forgiveness nor comfort. His act of repentance itself was too presumptuous to begin with.

“It’s all a mistake,” he asserted with a voice saturated in gloom, devoid of any color as it slipped quietly to the ground. “It’s completely my fault. All of it. From the very beginning.”

Ever since he left Yuki behind and walked out of the Suou manor. That was the moment he took the first step down a path of many mistakes. Even now, he continued to wander, as if he was lost, down this wrong path. This foolish self of his.

“Masachika Kuze was a mistake.”

★·☆·★

“I’m just some worthless scumbag that’s wasting his life away at the expense of Yuki’s—my little sister’s life… That’s all there is to me… Masachika Kuze.”

Like a criminal awaiting inevitable judgment, Masachika’s head hung low as he confessed, drowning himself in self-loathing and immense regret. Alisa listened, half in a daze.

The confession had begun with the shocking revelation that Yuki was his sister. To be honest, she was still struggling to process that. Still, there were parts of his story that made sense to her.

Ah, so… that’s how it was.

Masachika would occasionally flash a clouded smile no matter what he accomplished. He actively avoided praise, shunned recognition, and always subtly distanced himself from the spotlight.

Alisa finally understood that all of this stemmed from his deep-seated remorse—the belief that his current lackluster self existed at the expense of his little sister.

"I have nothing… *nothing* I can be proud of… Who I'm now is just a worthless piece of trash…"

I can't even imagine what he's feeling…

Alisa knew the pain of being unable to validate her own way of life. The agony of not knowing if the path you're on was right, yet being unable to walk any other, pressing on stubbornly alone.

But, the anguish of being unable to avoid denying the very own meaning of your existence…? That was something Alisa couldn't even begin to imagine. She had no words she could offer that would comfort him from that kind of suffering. She just felt… sad.

"It's all a big mistake. All of it. From the very beginning."

The sight of the boy before her tormenting himself made her heart scream out in pain. She was frustrated that she was unable to say or do anything for him. But, then—

"Masachika Kuze was a mistake."

At that, something inside Alisa snapped.

"…Was it really a mistake?" she asked.

Like a dam that had burst open, those words spilled from her lips before she even knew it.

"Was it *really* all a mistake?"

Her chest, even her words, trembled. Tears began to streak down her cheeks. Without bothering to wipe them away, she lifted her face, glared directly at Masachika, grabbed his shoulders, and shouted.

"But you… you met me, didn't you!?"

Through her blurred vision, she saw Masachika's eyes widen in shock. Those eyes, that had just a moment ago been falling into a dark abyss, were now clearly meeting hers. Just that alone was enough to make Alisa's heart scream with joy.

Maybe… even in some timeline where Masachika had remained a Suou, they might have still met.

But if that had happened—if the person she'd met that day in that classroom had been Masachika *Suou*, raised as the perfect gentleman—

Ah. Surely, I wouldn't have been this drawn to him.

The one she had fallen in love with, the one she had truly come to adore, was Masachika *Kuze*, the one standing before her now. He wasn't perfect at all; she could list his countless flaws, but now, she found even those endearing. It was *this* Masachika she loved. To have him say that he was all some big mistake… That was something she absolutely couldn't accept.

"The words you said earlier. About being grateful for meeting me—were they… were they all lies?" Alisa squeezed out, forcing her words, lowering her head.

She continued to grip Masachika's shoulders. Her tears still wouldn't stop; she must've looked terrible.

This wasn't what she'd intended on doing. She wanted to say something kind to Masachika, who was drowning in regret. But instead, she let her emotions get the better of her and said something so selfish, so accusatory.

Haaah… *I'm the worst…*

As the intense emotions eventually subsided, regret took their place. Overwhelmed by the unbearable situation, she felt pathetic. She crouched into a ball and let her tears fall silently to the ground.

Then, a gentle hand rested on her shoulder.

"Thank you, Alya."

Hearing his unexpected words of gratitude, Alisa lifted her face slightly.

She met Masachika's eyes, and even though they were tinged with pain, they now held a faint smile.

"You're right, Alya. Meeting you… getting to work with you… it all happened because I made that mistake back then," he spoke gingerly, as if out of concern for Alisa, who was crying.

Closing his eyes, as if confronting himself, Masachika nodded, before opening them again.

"Yeah. Looking at it like that, I can see it wasn't all a mistake. Truly," Masachika declared with sincere conviction, before bowing his head.

"And I'm sorry. I was being insensitive. I didn't mean to hurt you. And…"

He looked up abruptly, looking straight into Alisa's eyes as he spoke.

"Meeting you has been one of the greatest joys of my life. I swear there's not a single lie in these words."

His words made Alisa's heart tighten as it skipped a beat. Her chest, which had been filled with immense sadness and regret just moments ago, was now overflowing with joy and affection. But admitting that was honestly too embarrassing.

【…I feel the same,】she murmured, her lips pressed against her knees.

Before Masachika could feign his typical ignorance and ask for a translation of what she'd said, she quickly wiped her tears away and stood up. Then, she extended her hand to Masachika, who was still sitting on the bench.

"Let's go."

"Eh?"

Masachika looked puzzled, and Alisa spoke to him directly.

"Go see Yuki-san. Put an end to your regrets."

Fear flickered through Masachika's eyes and his expression tensed. He began to lower his wavering gaze again, but before he could, Alisa raised her voice with sharp determination.

"I'll be with you. This time, *I'll* be the one to support you. So… just take my hand!"

Masachika's shoulders twitched and his gaze lifted once more. He widened his eyes in surprise before softening his expression and placing his hand over Alisa's. Holding his hand firmly, Alisa pulled him up with a strong tug. Then, with a quick turn, she began to march toward the road, still holding his hand.

"Eh? Ah, wait a minute! We're really going now? The party's still going on, right? You're the star of the show, you can't just leave!"

"I can leave the rest to Masha, Mom, and Dad. Besides, I can always apologize to everyone later," Alisa declared.

"Even then… At least grab your coat or something. How are we even gonna get there?"

"By bus, taxi… whatever works, right? Come on, let's go!"

"A taxi… But that's expensi—"

"Just hurry up already!"

Alisa pressed forward, pulling Masachika along with her without giving him a chance to argue back. Unbeknownst to them, a shadowy figure observed their exchange from the shadows.

Hmm~ …*Looks like I'm too late*.

It was Nonoa. She'd dropped out of the werewolf game early on purpose and came outside under the guise of searching for Alisa, who hadn't returned despite being gone for a while now.

From the start, it had been Nonoa who, after hearing about Yuki from Ayano, had been planning to bring Masachika to the Suou manor. She had pushed Ayano, who wished for Masachika to visit the bedridden Yuki, to take action and had planned to be the first to console Masachika, thereby getting closer to his heart.

“I’ll at least listen to what you have to say, okay? Whether it’s about Yuki or Yusho, I think I’m more familiar with Kuzecchi’s circumstances than others. I don’t mean to brag, but I’m capable of giving you some objective advice, y’know~?”

“Thank you… but, I’m okay for now.”

“…Can you hang in there?”

“Yeah, I’ll do my best… Thank you.”

“Hm, okay.”

That was the conversation Nonoa had with Masachika in the Kujou family’s living room. She knew Masachika wasn’t the type to open up around others, so she was certain that if they could be alone, Masachika would have confided in her.

Just one more push, and I could’ve opened his heart…

After all, Masachika had been extremely wary of her, so she had been unable to get close to his heart for a long time. *This* was her chance to finally get a feel for his raw emotions, but Alisa had beaten her to it. Her plan had been thwarted.

“……”

Even just by observing from a distance, Nonoa could feel the raw, festering emotions surfacing from within Masachika. She had wanted to be the one to touch them, to reach into the depths of his soul and grab his very core. Achieving that would have surely allowed her to do as she pleased with him.

She could have easily offered him sweet and gentle words, completely confining his heart in her grasp. Crushing his heart with cruel words was also an option, allowing her to savor in schadenfreude. Just imagining it sparked a thrilling sensation in her otherwise unmoving heart.

Ahh~ How thrilling~! I never thought I’d feel like this from anyone other than Sayacchi~!

And yet, having this prime opportunity snatched away right before her eyes filled Nonoa's heart with an indescribable sense of frustration.

Hmm~ *But she's always in the way~ So annoying. Is this jealousy?*

What she felt wasn't just simple disgust for someone she didn't like, but a more prickly kind of irritation. It made her mouth twist involuntarily, and she felt a burning desire to stomp the ground in frustration. But despite that, she still didn't hate it. After all, this was an emotion she never would've experienced if it wasn't for *her* involvement with Masachika.

But still, she's frustrating. Definitely frustrating.

It was better than being bored, but it wasn't a feeling Nonoa wanted to willingly indulge in. After all, Alisa really *was* a nuisance to her.

Don't really wanna hurt my friend, but oh well. It can't be helped.

Of course, that's a lie. Nonoa honestly didn't care about hurting her friends. What was stopping her was the fact that her parents had always told her to take good care of her friends. Her parents' wishes were law; she couldn't act against them. But…

But it really *can't be helped… Anything's acceptable when it comes to love.*

Her mother had once told her that love was a battlefield. Everything was acceptable in the name of love. Nonoa had defined her feelings for Masachika as love; therefore, this was acceptable.

"Friends come and go, especially in the name of love~ …Or something like that."

Whispering words she'd heard in passing, Nonoa turned on her heel and used the key she borrowed from Maria to re-enter the apartment. Returning to the Kujou household, she entered the living room and immediately met Maria's gaze, who was holding her smartphone.

“Ah, Nonoa-chan. Sorry for makin’ you go out of your way to look for her. I just got a call from Alya-chan. Looks like they’re heading to Yuki-chan’s house…”

Hearing this, Nonoa quickly contemplated what to do next before deciding to just speak honestly about what she’d seen.

“Ah, so that’s what it was~. I saw Kuzecchi and Alisa runnin’ off somewhere together.”

“*Reeeally?* I didn’t get the full story, but I think something urgent came up,” Maria said, tilting her head in confusion.

Seeing her puzzled expression, Nonoa casually decided to provide some clarification.

“Yeah. They looked really rushed, y’know~? Like they were runnin’ out of time? Something must’ve happened~”

Listening to their conversation, Touya slowly spoke up.

“*Hmm*… Well, I mean, it’s gotta be something serious if li’l sister Kujou’s rushing somewhere.”

“Yeah… Wait, didn’t Yuki-chan have some urgent matter?” Chisaki asked, looking at the others for confirmation.

Nonoa, the only one present who knew the truth, kept silent to avoid losing access to Ayano’s information. A heavy atmosphere permeated over the living room for a brief moment.

Sensing this, Takeshi spoke up in a particularly bright voice, “Well, I don’t know what’s going on, but something must’ve come up! We’ll hear about it later!”

“Yeah, that’s right. If Masachika and Alya-san are together, we probably don’t need to worry about it,” Hikaru immediately chimed in as Takeshi grinned in response.

“Come to think of it… Something like this happened back during that festival in summer too, amirite? During the fireworks.”

“Hm? Oh *yeaaaah*~. That did happen! Kuze-kun suddenly grabbed Alya-chan’s hand and ran off!” Chisaki exposed.

“What!? When did that happen? Dang, Masachika… I didn’t know you’d do something straight out of a teen romance!”

Chisaki’s words sparked great interest in Takeshi, and the group began to reminisce about that time, the conversation picking up again.

Even though it’s quite out of the ordinary for the birthday party’s guest of honor to leave midway through, thanks to Alisa’s good nature, no one in the room felt it was out of malice.

She’s pretty well trusted… It’s gonna be tough breaking this apart.

Observing her surroundings, Nonoa calmly analyzed everything behind her usual nonchalant expression. Just then, Sayaka called out to her in a slightly puzzling tone.

“Nonoa?”

“*Hmm?* What’s up, Sayacchi?”

“*Staaaaaare.*”

“*Hmmmm?* What is it, what is it? You’re makin’ me blush~,” Nonoa grinned at Sayaka, who was staring at her intensely.

“Nothing… Do you want something to drink?” Sayaka asked, finally averting her gaze.

“Ah, I do, I do~. I’d like a cola, please~”

“Geez, how many did you drink already? You’ll gain weight if you keep this up.”

“I never gain weight, so I’m fine~. See? I’m not getting any fatter, y’know?”

Saying this, Nonoa wrapped her arms around Sayaka’s in a way that more or less resembled a child seeking affection rather than someone plotting in the shadows. To a bystander, her behavior seemed far removed from any nefarious schemes or dark plots, appearing completely innocent.

★·☆·★

Meanwhile, at that very moment, the two people who'd been at the center of all the talk—Alisa and Masachika—were sitting on a bus heading toward the Suou manor. They sat side by side on a two-seater bench, with no conversation emanating between them. Instead, Alisa had her right hand firmly grasped on Masachika's left, as if she was grabbing onto him, trying to keep him from slipping away.

"……"

She glanced at the boy sitting beside her. His profile revealed no trace of emotion, but his eyes, seemingly unfocused on anything in particular, indicated that he was deep in thought, wrestling with his emotions.

Maybe I shouldn't disturb him right now.

Fortunately, he didn't seem to be drowning in regret, unlike earlier. Taking that into consideration, it was probably best to just leave him alone. While it had worked out by chance before, Alisa wasn't exactly great with words. What Masachika needed right now wasn't someone else's words, so remaining silent was the best course of action.

Having reached that conclusion, Alisa turned her gaze to the bus window and decided to focus on her own thoughts. Now that things had calmed down a bit, there was something she absolutely needed to consider. Namely—

What did he mean by sister?

This.

Now that she'd calmed down, all Alisa could think about was this burning question. Memories of her interactions with Yuki came flooding back one after another.

Then what was that about?

Among these memories, the most vivid one was the time when Yuki cornered her in an empty classroom at dusk.

"I told you, I love him! You should say it clearly too, Alya-san!"

Overwhelmed by Yuki's forcefulness at the time, Alisa had declared that she wouldn't let go of Masachika. It was purely because of her intense sense of rivalry with Yuki, who was Masachika's *supposed* childhood friend and election partner back in junior high. She felt that if she didn't declare that clearly, Yuki might take Masachika away from her. But…

His sister! His sister!? Huh, wait a minute!? Then doesn't that make me the crazy girl who told her crush's sister that she wouldn't let go of him!? N-no way… AAAAAAAH!!

While desperately trying to not show it on her face, Alisa internally writhed in embarrassment, mentally covering her face with both hands.

She imagined the scene: Maria's crush, that guy named Saa-kun or whatever, saying to her, "I won't let go of Masha-san!" Yep, no doubt about it. That guy would be a total weirdo. Completely cringeworthy. She'd have warned Maria later, "You might wanna rethink who you're dating." And to think that she had done the *exact* same thing herself.

Ngghhhhh!

"Alya?"

It was only when Masachika called out to her did she snap out of it. She turned to him, only to see him looking at her with a slightly puzzled expression.

"Something wrong?"

"Oh, um, nothing…"

"Really?"

"Yes."

She turned her face away, signaling that she didn't want to be pressed on the matter. Seemingly understanding her silent plea, Masachika said nothing further and returned his gaze forward. Watching him through the reflection in the window, Alisa inwardly breathed a sigh of relief.

Phew… *Alright, let's just stop thinking about this for now. I'd fall deeper down the rabbit hole the more I think about it…*

With that thought, Alisa decided to stop thinking about it. This was just *too* much information to process at the moment.

Besides, I'm holding hands with Masachika right now… He's got to notice if I start getting flustered…

But as that realization struck her, she froze.

I-I'm holding hands with Masachika!?

A sudden shock coursed through Alisa. No, it wasn't like holding hands was something to make a fuss about. After all, she'd held hands with him a few times before. But this was different. First of all, Alisa was now consciously aware of, and accepted, her romantic feelings for him. Holding hands with someone you like is *completely* different from holding hands with someone who was just a friend! And besides—

Wait, lemme think about this calmly.

They had let go of each other's hands after walking to the bus stop from the park bench hand-in-hand. Then, when they got on the bus, they held hands again… Yep, that sounds about right.

I'm *the one who took his hand again, aren't I!?*

No way. She didn't have any ulterior motives. She *absolutely* hadn't seized this chance to sneakily hold his hand. She'd only grabbed it to make sure he didn't try to run away.

Y-yeah, that's it. Just like Masachika took my hand before, I just wanted to be the one to take his hand this time… That's all!

But still, the fact remained that Alisa had taken the initiative to hold hands with a boy. And he wasn't just any boy; he was the one she had feelings for. And what's more, she'd done it rather forcefully. They weren't *just* holding hands when they got on the bus—she'd practically grabbed him and pulled him along. To her, that's…

I'm practically a carnivorous woman![1]

Alisa banged her head against the wall mentally, howling.

To her, a normal girl couldn't simply grab the hand of a boy she liked. Even if she mustered up all her courage, it was still something Alisa couldn't easily do. Ideally, she'd only somehow manage to offer her hand and hope that he would take it. That's how it should be. But grabbing his hand without a second thought? Well, that's definitely something a carnivorous woman would do! A girl who aggressively pursues the boy she's interested in!

Modesty! A lady should have modesty and restraint!

Feeling as though her virtue was being chipped away, Alisa squirmed internally again. So what? She'd done bolder things before. Well, to her, that was just teasing a cocky male friend and showing him who was boss—that itself was fine. She wasn't seriously trying to seduce anyone, and she certainly wasn't trying to seduce him now, either!

S-seduction is immoral! That's definitely something a lady wouldn't do!

She genuinely believed that. And yet, why did she feel this strange thrill…? The idea of seducing Masachika, of breaking his usual calm demeanor, making him desperately seek her out—just imagining that sent shivers from deep in her stomach up to her heart. But, she immediately reprimanded herself.

You idiot! What're you thinking at a time like this! Masachika's trying to face his family right now, y'know!? And here you are, lost and blinded by your silly love!

She glanced sideways at Masachika, who wore a slightly melancholic expression. It was clear that he was in no state to be thinking about who took whose hand first or how they held it.

Look… Masachika doesn't have time for silly thoughts like that right now! …Wait, maybe "silly's" a bit harsh?

She mentally criticized herself, feeling slightly annoyed. She knew this wasn't the time for such thoughts, but the fact that she wasn't even being noticed made her both frustrated and anxious as a girl in love.

Can't you at least blush a little? Or maybe be kinda nervous? Or has holding hands become so ordinary for you that it's no longer special? Doesn't it make your heart race? Even though I'm so conscious of you here…

Driven by the dissatisfaction and anxiety swirling in her heart, Alisa squeezed Masachika's hand lightly, causing him to blink a few times before turning to look at her.

"Hm? Alya?" he asked.

"Ah, um…"

The expression that Masachika looked at her with was filled with pure curiosity. Alisa hesitated for a moment, before quickly blurting out that seemed appropriate.

"It'll be okay. I'm sure," she assured him.

"…Yeah, thanks."

Her words, though full of baseless reassurance, made Masachika smile faintly as he thanked her and turned back to face forward. Once again, no signs of embarrassment nor nervousness were reflected in his demeanor.

Hmph.

This only caused Alisa's dissatisfaction and anxiety to grow even stronger. She decided she could no longer let this chance go without making him at least a little bit more aware of her presence.

But how could she do that? Showing off her chest? Clinging on to his arm? Those ideas were out of the question. That would be *way* too insensitive given the current situation; not to mention, it wasn't even something you should do in public with others around. Whatever she'd do, it'd have to be subtle; something that could pass as an act without any strange intentions.

What should I do…?

She pondered for a moment, and then became aware again of the state of their linked hands.

They were loosely clasped and rested on the seat between them with hers on top and Masachika's underneath. Now that she thought about it, it was pretty cramped.

That's it!

An idea struck her, and she took advantage of the bus turning a corner. Under the pretense of being pushed by centrifugal force to exaggerate her movement, she slid her leg sideways, lightly squishing their joined hands with it.

"Ah, sorry."

"Hm? Oh, yeah…"

She shot a quick glance at Masachika's face, confirming that he didn't seem to find anything odd. When the bus straightened out again, Alisa—while making a conscious effort to appear casual—casually lifted their hands.

If she'd left their hands there, she might have hit them again with her legs. So, without any ulterior motives… yes, *without* any true ulterior motives here… she placed their hands on her thigh.

Hyah!

The slight chill of Masachika's hand against her bare thigh made Alisa shiver, but she suppressed the urge to react and nonchalantly turned to look out the window, stealing a glance at his reflection.

How 'bout that!

As for Masachika's reflection in the window… Well, he was practically the same as the minute before, simply staring ahead. He didn't even seem to care at all that his left hand was now resting on her thigh.

"....."

Seeing this, Alisa's spirits deflated, and instead, a wave of indescribable embarrassment washed over her. What was she even doing? No, seriously.

Am I stupid...? No, I'm definitely *stupid. Doing something like this, at a time like this...? And to top it off, he hasn't even noticed me at all...! How ridiculous...*

Feeling utterly ashamed and regretting her foolishness, what now conquered Alisa's mind was a mix of embarrassment and misery. All she wanted now was to return their hands to their original position, and pretend like none of this had ever happened. But pulling back now would only make it so glaringly unnatural, completely ruining her attempt to act casual. So, all she could do at this point was to continue carving this incident into her dark history. There was no other choice.

Argghh. *I wanna disappear... Please, just let us arrive soon...*

While trying her hardest to maintain a poker face, and despite being on the verge of tears now, Alisa silently prayed. Meanwhile, sitting next to her, Masachika, too, was deep in his own thoughts.

I need to face the past... And then what? No, in the first place, what do I... really want to do? Plus, by now, Yuki's surely feeling thighs... With the flu. Soft... th-thighs. Skirts, thigh-highs, thighs!

Turns out, Alisa's plot had worked brilliantly. His thoughts were being drowned out by thighs. A large part of his attention went into trying to keep a composed expression too.

Masachika struggled to pull his focus away from his left hand. But, of course, it was impossible. Furthermore, his gaze kept instinctively drifting toward Alisa's thigh, confirming where the back of his left hand was currently resting.

Ugh...!

Catching sight of it from the corner of his eye, Masachika secretly gulped. It was also at this time that he unconsciously started to recite a passionate monologue he'd once read online from an otaku, who claimed to be a huge fan of thigh-highs, suddenly in his mind.

"What's super important is the area above thigh-highs! You feel me, right!? That little bit of flesh that gets slightly squished by them! It's absolute perfection! The way the thigh-highs squeeze in, and the way the flesh from the thighs slightly bulge out… I-it's just irresistible!"

And now, Masachika's hand was directly touching that precise, sacred, absolute territory[2]—the area between skirts and thigh-highs, the mystical gap where both give way to exposed skin.

Gah!

His index finger brushed against the rough fabric of her skirt, while his pinky finger bore the smooth texture of her thigh-highs. And around his middle and ring fingers, he encountered the soft, supple flesh of Alisa's bare skin. If only it'd been his palm instead the back of his hand, just what kinda thing could he…

Hol' up! What the fuck am I thinking? What's with these messed-up thoughts!? Die! Just die already! How could you be horny at a time like this!?

It was just moments ago when he'd been seriously contemplating what he should do next. But, the second he encountered this unexpected lucky pervert moment, all of that flew out the window. And he despised himself for letting such lecherous thoughts creep in.

Look! Alya's acting normal, isn't she? She probably doesn't mean anything by it! She's not smirking, and she's not showing any signs of her usual flirtatious behavior! She just moved our hands to a more comfortable spot… Arrrghhh. *Just die already! Die, you stupid pervert!!*

Masachika clenched his teeth in secret, struggling to maintain his composure. All the while…

Am I… this hopeless…?

Alisa curled up inwardly in her mind dejectedly as she tried to desperately keep her expression neutral.

There were still seven more stops to go.

[1]: “肉食系女子” or “肉食女” (literally meaning “meat-eating/carnivorous woman”), is a term used to describe women who aggressively pursue social status/confidence through sex, men, wealth, or fame.

[2]: Zettai ryōiki (絶対領域), literally “absolute territory,” is a term coined by otaku culture to refer to the area of bare skin in the gap between thigh-highs and skirts.

Chapter 2 - And So The Child And His Mother's Eyes Met

Having ridden the bus for twenty minutes and walking for another ten, Masachika finally stood in front of the Suou manor, a place he hadn't laid eyes on for several years.

Ah…

Memories of the past flooded back in vivid clarity. It was a home he thought he'd never return to; a place that he believed would never welcome him back. He gazed at the ominously large gate leading to the grand garden and the intercom beside it; he stared at it, not moving an inch.

I don't wanna press it~

Don't get him wrong—he'd already resolved to go inside. After coming all this way, he'd already accepted that he'd have to do *that* much. But still, he couldn't help but question…

I mean, I don't have to enter so blatantly through the front gate, right?

More specifically, wouldn't it be better to secretly call Ayano on his phone and have her sneak him in? After all, it was her who'd invited him to the Suou manor, so it wouldn't be a big ask. And more importantly, doing so would at least significantly reduce his chances of accidentally running into his grandfather or mother before he saw Yuki.

I really don't wanna see those two with Alya around…

He wasn't even sure how he should act in front of them. There was also the possibility of saying something that would shock Alisa, and the idea of returning to his childhood home for the first time in ages with a girl by his side was just begging for trouble in the first place.

I'll call Ayano, go straight to Yuki's room, entrust Alya to them, and then… face everyone else. Yeah, let's go with that.

Having finally made up his mind, Masachika reached for his phone, but before he could pull it out, a pale hand extended from beside him and pushed the intercom button.

"Hey—"

"What? Waiting around here's not gonna do us any good, right?" Alisa explained herself.

"Yeah, but I had a plan—"

"Masachika-sama?" a voice suddenly rang out from the intercom.

It was Natsu, the Suou family's servant, a voice Masachika hadn't heard in years, but immediately recognized regardless. He froze for a moment before finally finding his words.

"...It's been a while, Natsu-san."

"O-oh my. Oh my, oh my, oh my! Indeed, indeed. It really has *been a long time! Um, and who might the young lady beside you be...?"* Natsu said in a surprised tone.

"Ah... well, um..."

Masachika was at a loss for words. Luckily Alisa smoothly stepped in with a polite greeting of her own.

"We're sorry to bother you at this late hour. I'm Alisa Mikhailovna Kujou, Masachika's classmate and Yuki's fellow student council member. We heard that Yuki-san's bedridden with the flu, so we decided to stop by and see her, even if just for a moment."

"My, how courteous of you... Very well, could you please wait for just a moment?" Natsu responded.

Her voice, now calm and collected, befitting a servant of the Suou family, echoed from the intercom before it went silent. Masachika let out a brief sigh and looked at Alisa beside him.

"...What?"

"N-nothing. I mean, you're *really* calm... Or rather, I'm impressed by how confident you are."

"…Of course. Didn't I tell you already? That *I'd* support you…?" Alisa explained, averting her eyes shyly.

Masachika's expression softened as he responded. "Yeah, you did… thanks."

"…It's nothing."

Alisa looked away even more, fiddling with her hair.

"But, I mean, shouldn't we let go of our hands?" Masachika pointed out, lightly lifting their joined hands.

"Eh? Oh…"

Alisa glanced down at their joined hands with a sulky expression for some reason.

Then, somehow turning her face even further away, she said, "I don't mind if we stay like this, though."

"Huh!? No, no, of course you mind! Look, there's a security camera right there! If we walk into my family's house holding hands, it'll look like we're announcing our engagement or something. If Natsu-san or someone else sees this, they'd definitely misunderstand!"

Imagining the reaction of the elderly woman, who was more of a romantic, in stark contrast to her serious granddaughter, Masachika spoke quickly while shooting nervous glances at the security camera on the wall.

Alisa also briefly looked at the camera, then turned her face away again, squeezing his hand tighter as she mumbled.

【I really don't mind, though?】she reassured.

You doooooon't!?

Despite the situation he found himself in, Masachika mentally screamed at the bombshell Alisa had just dropped.

You don't mind being misunderstood? Huh!? You mean I could actually introduce you as my fiancee? Like, "Um, hey guys, we're getting married!"? Natsu-san would definitely lose her shit! No, no, no, you've gotta be joking, right!?

He stared intently at Alisa, but couldn't read her expression as she continued to look the other way. Still, even in the dim light, he could clearly see the tips of her ears turning red.

You're joking… right?

He could feel his palms getting sweaty. He wanted to let go now, but abruptly breaking free now would be rude. Yet, at the same time, Natsu might have already informed Masachika's grandfather, who could open the front door any minute now…

Wait, wait, wait. Staying silent here's a recipe for disaster!

Remembering that he was keeping his proficiency in Russian under wraps forced himself to remain calm.

"I don't know what you said, but… for now, can we let go of our hands? Seriously. I know I didn't explain it clearly before, but the head of this household and I don't exactly get along. He'd definitely yell at me for 'messing around' if I walked in holding hands with a girl…" Masachika pleaded.

Having heard Masachika's rapid-fire explanation, Alisa shot him a dissatisfied glare before finally letting go of his hand. As he sighed in relief, Alisa mumbled something in a small voice while still fidgeted with her hair.

【You could've at least been a little more aware of it…】

…Huh? Wait, that's *why you're upset? Because I didn't outwardly react at all when we were holding hands?*

How cute. That thought naturally came to mind, and Masachika quickly turned his face away in response. At that moment, a loud clattering sound startled him out of his thoughts, making him jump slightly.

Looking up, he saw that the gate in front of him had begun to open automatically. The sound he'd heard was it unlocking. Realizing this, Masachika exhaled a small sigh of relief.

Wait, what am I relieved about?

He was about to walk into one of the scariest confrontations of his life. He had hoped that when the time came, he'd face it with steely resolve. But now…

I never imagined I'd be walking through here like this. With feelings like this…

Feeling strangely amused, Masachika stepped into the manor grounds with a slight sense of deflation. Without glancing back, he called out to Alisa, who was following a step behind him.

"Alya."

"What?"

"Thanks."

"*…Mhm*."

Faced with her usual curt response, Masachika let out a small smile in return before continuing his march toward the manor's entrance. As he approached, the door opened, revealing the person he'd been dreading to face—Gensei Suou.

The head of the Suou family, Yuki's and Masachika's grandfather, and the one who'd ordered Masachika never to call himself Yuki's brother again when he left the house.

"……"

Those same sharp, cold eyes of the past pierced through Masachika. Yet, to his surprise, he found himself unusually calm.

Just a moment ago, I thought I wouldn't know how to react… Is this also thanks to Alya?

With that thought in mind, Masachika continued walking, meeting Gensei's gaze head-on, stopping only a few steps away.

Taking the initiative, he spoke out first, "My apologies for arriving at such a late hour. I heard my *classmate*, Yuki-san, had fallen ill, so I came by to visit. I don't mean to be rude."

"A visit. Without prior notice or even a gift, I see," Gensei replied, glancing at Masachika and Alisa with a sharp look.

“My apologies. We’d only just heard about it from Ayano-san and rushed over.”

Masachika continued to apologize sincerely, unfazed by Gensei’s cold words. In response, Gensei narrowed his eyes slightly, and Alisa stepped forward, bowing next to Masachika.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you. I am Alisa Mikhailovna Kujou, a fellow student council member along with Yuki-san. I understand that the hour is inappropriate, but may we greet her?”

Gensei’s gaze then shifted to Alisa.

“I am Gensei Suou, Yuki’s grandfather… You say you’re just visiting, but have you informed your guardians?” he stared straight into her eyes as he spoke.

“Yes.”

“Ah…”

Masachika let out an awkward sound, realizing he’d completely forgotten to inform his own dad, Kyotarou. With everything that had been wreaking havoc on his mind and being used to living alone, the thought of contacting family wasn’t something that had crossed his mind. Alisa, standing next to him, also made a small sound, opening her mouth in surprise as she heard him, all the while Gensei shot another glare at Masachika. Expecting the verbal beatdown of a lifetime, Masachika was getting ready to apologize again when—

“Very well… Come in.”

To his surprise, Gensei had instead turned on his heel and walked into the manor, holding the door open. He called out to Natsu, who’d been waiting at the back of the entrance.

“We have guests. Take them to Yuki’s room.”

“Understood. Please, Kuze-sama, Kujou-sama,” Natsu immediately responded gracefully, bowing to Gensei as she invited Masachika and Alisa inside.

As they entered the entrance hall, Gensei disappeared deeper into the house.

"....."

"Please, use these."

As they watched him leave, Natsu handed them a pair of slippers, which Masachika and Alisa put on.

"Thank you for coming today. Oh, Kujou-sama, thank you for your kind words earlier. I am Natsu Kimishima, Ayano Kimishima's grandmother and a servant of this house."

"Ah, so you're Ayano-san's grandmother... Hello again. I'm Alisa Mikhailovna Kujou. I apologize for intruding at such an hour."

"Oh, not at all. I'm sure Yuki-sama will be pleased. But please wear these masks to avoid catching her sickness."

"Ah, thank you very much."

"Thank you very much."

"Not at all, not at all. Now please, this way," Natsu said, leading the way.

Having received masks from Natsu, they followed her deeper into the manor. As they walked, Natsu spoke without facing them.

"I must say, I'm truly surprised. I never expected Masachika-sama to come back to this house, especially with such a lovely young lady at his side."

"...Sorry for showing up unannounced."

"Oh no, not at all. I'm truly happy right now... Ah, I might just start crying. Oh dear, when you get older, you become more emotional," Natsu sniffled, dabbing at the corners of her eyes, making Masachika feel slightly uncomfortable.

Fortunately, they soon arrived in front of Yuki's room, and Natsu knocked on the door three times. In response, the door opened silently from the other side.

"Yes—"

It was Ayano who'd answered, her eyes widening in surprise as they landed on Masachika standing behind Natsu.

"Masachika-sama…"

"…My bad. I'm late," Masachika commented.

At his words, Ayano's wide eyes glistened slightly as she lowered her gaze.

"Not at all… Please, come in."

With that, Ayano stepped aside to let Masachika and Alisa enter.

Sooner… I should've come sooner…

Both Natsu's and Ayano's emotional reactions stirred these pained thoughts in Masachika's mind, but all traces of such sentimental thoughts vanished the moment he saw Yuki lying on the bed.

"Ah…"

In the large bed lay a small figure with long black hair that had been neatly braided. A faint scent of soap lingered in the air, and the damp atmosphere clung to Masachika's skin, all of it culminating into a trigger that stirred up memories of the past, leaving him frozen in place.

"Masachika-kun…"

It was only when Alisa's concerned voice brought him back to reality did he awkwardly resume walking. Sitting down in the chair by the bed, where Ayano had probably been sitting earlier, he hesitantly reached out to Yuki.

He lightly touched her small forehead, absorbing her warmth as it spread across his palm, making him bite his lip.

Just then, Yuki's eyes slowly fluttered open.

"Ah…"

Her vacant eyes stared at the ceiling before slowly shifting toward Masachika.

"Onii-sama…?" she whispered in a hoarse, raspy voice.

"!"

She called out to him like how she had back when they were younger. Suppressing the rush of emotions welling up inside of him, Masachika choked out a reply.

"Yeah… Are you okay?" he asked.

The moment he asked that, he realized how stupid his question was. But, when he saw Yuki's face crumpling in response, Masachika was taken aback.

"Yuki…?"

"*U-uuuwaaaaahh~~. Nii-samaaaaa~~~*"

Tears streaked down from the corners of her now-shut eyes as she cried like a child, her voice cracking and hitching as she sobbed uncontrollably.

"*Uuuuuu~~~*. It *huuuuurts~~*. It's so *painfuuul~~~*. *Hic, hic.* I can't take it *anymooooree~~*"

The ladylike character she played at school, the mischievous side she showed at home—neither could have predicted the childish figure now before him. Yuki's heart-rending cries squeezed Masachika's chest with unbearable strength.

Why… Why didn't I come sooner…

Unable to hold back himself, tears began to spill from his own eyes. Completely forgetting that Alisa was watching them from behind, Masachika wrapped his arms around Yuki's small frame lying on the bed, pulling her into an embrace.

"I'm sorry, I'm so sorry," he apologized repeatedly, tears streaming down his face.

Whether Yuki could hear him or not, she continued to voice her suffering in a weak voice.

"I… I don't want this anymore… Why… why am I the only one who has to go through this… It hurts… Help *meee~*…"

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry…! If only I could take your place…"

“*Uuuuuu~… hic… uuuuuuu~~*”

“I’m sorry… I’m sorry…”

As he held Yuki’s frail body, Masachika stroked her back again and again. Through her pajamas, he could feel her thin skin and the sharp outline of her bones, which only deepened his sorrow and guilt and caused his tears to flow even more freely.

★·☆·★

Alisa watched the two of them huddled together silently. An odd warmth spread through her nose, and her vision blurred as she blinked repeatedly in an attempt to maintain her composure.

Ah, I see… It's true…

It was only now that Alisa fully understood the fact that these two were truly *just* siblings. How could she have ever mistaken them for a couple? The sight of them crying together, embracing each other—no matter how you looked at it, it was clear that they were family.

Ah…

She understood now. Everything he said had been the truth. There were *no* emotions that existed between Masachika and Yuki that exceeded that of familial love or sibling affection.

She came to terms with the fact that Masachika harbored no feelings beyond what he felt for Yuki toward Alisa. Yuki was never her rival in love, but she was someone Alisa could never hope to surpass. To Masachika, Yuki was undoubtedly special; she was precious beyond comparison to anyone else.

Who Masachika-kun needs right now… is Yuki-san, not me…

A cold emptiness filled her chest. *Why am I even here?* These uncomfortable thoughts creeped into the back of her mind, intensifying her loneliness. She hated herself for feeling this way, for harboring such selfish emotions, and she lowered her gaze in shame.

"Alisa-san, if you'd like, please…" Ayano called out to her, quietly offering her a chair.

Alisa blinked a few times before shaking her head.

"Thank you, but I'm fine."

When she raised her head back, she saw that Yuki had apparently stopped crying and fallen back to sleep. Masachika was already gently laying her back down on the bed. Gently resting her head on the pillow, he pulled the blanket up to her shoulders, and wiped away any traces of sweat and tears with a damp towel. His movements were full of tenderness and compassion.

"……"

The room fell into silence. What was left was only the sound of Yuki's faint breathing as she slept. Masachika gazed intently at her, while Alisa and Ayano, watching his back, remained silent as well.

It was unclear how much time had passed when a sudden knock on the door broke the silence, causing Alisa to quickly turn her attention that way. Ayano swiftly moved to open the door without making a sound, and a familiar middle-aged woman entered the room.

"Yuki-sa—" she called out, before stopping abruptly upon seeing Masachika sitting by Yuki's bed, her expression clearly tense.

Isn't that… Yuki-san's mother?

Confirming that the woman *was* indeed Yuki's mother, Yumi Suou, who she'd already met once at the recent sports festival, Alisa instinctively turned to look at Masachika. Seeing him stare at Yumi with a somewhat stern expression, she then shifted her gaze back to Yumi. Suddenly, it all clicked.

Ah… That's right.

How had she not noticed until now? It was glaringly obvious upon reflection. If Masachika and Yuki were siblings, that meant that Yuki's mother was also… Masachika's mother. In other words, the two standing before her right now in this room… were none other than mother and son.

Eh? Uhhh, What do I do? What am I supposed to do…?

As the tension in the room grew increasingly thick, just as it had during their encounter at the sports festival, Alisa, not knowing why but feeling the instinctive need to say something, was then interrupted by a voice that came from behind Yumi: Natsu's.

"Oh my, Yumi-sama, you came in without even washing your hands… I understand you're worried about Yuki-sama, but please, go wash your hands and gargle first," the Suou family servant commented.

Startled by her cheerful tone, Yumi awkwardly turned back to look at her.

"Y-you're right… I'll go do that," she replied quietly before leaving the room.

With a small sigh of relief, Alisa glanced at Masachika. He, too, had shifted his gaze to her, smiling somewhat sheepishly.

"Sorry 'bout that…"

"Ah, *mhm*… It's nothing really…"

As Alisa faltered with her words, Masachika stood up from his chair, quietly walking over to her.

"Thanks for today. Thanks to you, Alya, I was finally able to find the courage to come here. Truly, from the bottom of my heart, I really appreciate it," he took her hands and said, looking directly into her eyes sincerely.

"! I didn't… really do anything…"

She really *hadn't* done anything. If anything, all she did was act selfishly, doing whatever she wanted. When was the last time she had actually done something with no ulterior motive, purely for Masachika's sake?

Even though I said I'd be the one to support him myself…

As Alisa lowered her gaze, consumed by self-loathing, Masachika shook his head gently.

"You've done more than enough for me. Thanks to you, I feel like I can finally get back on the right path."

"The right… path?"

Masachika didn't answer her question directly, but instead, he responded with a small smile, bowing his head.

"Thank you, really. I'll be fine now. I'll face everything properly… So, Alya, please go home to your family. They must be worried."

Understanding what Masachika was implying, Alisa hesitated for a moment before slowly nodding.

"…Got it. Then, I'll be going home now."

"Yeah. Sorry for draggin' you into my own problems. I'll properly thank you and explain everything next time."

“I see. Alright, I’ll look forward to it then,” Alisa said, as Masachika lifted his head, giving her a faint smile.

“Natsu-san, could you please see her home?” he asked Natsu, turning to her.

“Of course. I’ll have the car brought around.”

“Thank you very much.”

“Please excuse me for the trouble,” Alisa said, offering her own gratitude.

“Not at all. I’m sorry we couldn’t be more hospitable… Please do come again next time. We’ll make sure to welcome you properly.”

“Oh, yes… Thank you very much.”

“Likewise, thank you very much. Now, this way, please,” Natsu offered her gratitude, escorting Alisa out of Yuki’s room.

As they headed toward the entrance, Alisa made eye contact with Yumi, who was walking down the hallway toward them.

“Ah, Masachika-san’s…”

“Yes, I’m Alisa Mikhailovna Kujou, Masachika’s classmate and partner in the student council elections. I apologize for intruding so late into the night.”

“Oh… Are you leaving already?”

“Yes.”

“I see… Please take care.”

“Thank you very much. Then, please excuse me.”

With just that brief exchange, the two passed each other. As Yumi walked back toward Yuki’s room, Alisa looked back over her shoulder, tilting her head in puzzlement.

She’s pretty timid—not like someone who would actively seek conflict… So why does Masachika act like that toward her?

That was something she didn't understand. But surely, one day, Masachika would tell her everything.

【...Good luck.】

Whispering those words to her partner staying behind, Alisa shifted her gaze forward and left the Suou manor.

★·☆·★

Yumi entered with a knock. Despite being faced with his mother, a person who he was probably on worse terms with even compared to Gensei, Masachika had managed to collect his thoughts while he waited for her, calmly standing up and clearing the chair for her.

Yumi, too, seemed to have made up her mind, stopping a few steps before him before slowly beginning to speak.

"It's been a while, hasn't it, Masachika-san."

"...Likewise, Mom."

At Masachika's casual way of addressing her, Yumi lowered her gaze, seemingly troubled. Though her eyes had once again turned away from him, Masachika, oddly calm now, watched her without losing his composure.

"...Yuki's asleep. She woke up a bit earlier, though." Masachika explained, gesturing for her to sit, before turning to look at Ayano. "Sorry, Ayano, could you prepare us something to drink?"

"Ah... Of course. Would tea be alright?"

"No, if possible, barley tea or something like that in a pitcher would be better."

"Understood. Please wait for a moment."

Having bowed her head, Ayano left the room. Masachika turned back to Yumi, who was checking up on Yuki.

...Her gaze looks more downcast than usual for some reason.

Masachika, seeing his mother up close for the first time in years, noticed that her expression was much darker and shadowed than he'd remembered. She'd always been more of a quiet and reserved person, but now she gave off a surprisingly gloomy expression. Even so, the way she looked at Yuki was full of pure concern. That part hadn't changed at all.

Or rather… That's not all?

No, it wasn't *just* that. Surely, Yumi's affection for Yuki had never changed, just as how she probably still loved Kyotarou even now.

The gentle figure of his mother that Masachika had once admired was simply no illusion. Rather, the Yumi who yelled at him that day was…

"Just stop already!"

"……"

Memories from that time flashed back, and Masachika closed his eyes momentarily, trying to ground himself.

Calm down. Don't just remember the bad moments. There was more to it than that, wasn't there?

It's all alright.

Masachika could now look back to his childhood with an unbiased perspective. He recalled how after she had yelled at him, Yumi's expression had instantly clouded with immense regret and guilt, and that, except for that one moment, Yumi had always been a kind mother to him. He could finally see it for how it was.

"…Mom."

"…What is it?"

Had guilt prevented her from meeting his eyes all this while? If so, then what was it that compelled her to stop looking at him long before that?

I need to know.

To end his regrets, to get on the right path… this was something he couldn't avoid.

"I want to talk," Masachika declared.

"……"

At his determined words, Yumi slowly turned to face him. Maybe she, too, had realized that there was no more running away.

"Back then… when I still lived here…" Masachika started, swallowing nervously.

He wet his lips with his tongue, summoning all his courage.

"Why did you stop looking me in the eye?"

Yumi's eyes wavered as she shifted her gaze away. But, after closing them briefly, she looked back at Masachika again. Holding her gaze, Masachika continued.

"At that time, why did you… reject me playing the piano?"

At this question, Yumi lowered her eyes, opting to remain silent for a while. After a bit, she raised her gaze once again, meeting Masachika's eyes.

"I think… I'll only hurt you no matter what I say," she disclosed, her voice laced with resignation and regret.

"But what I can tell you is… it's not your fault. And neither is it Kyotarou's. It's all my fault—my selfishness… I truly believe I did something I can never take back to you."

Her bowed figure, resembling that of a sinner confessing her guilt, overlapped with the image of Masachika from an hour earlier when he had confessed to Alisa.

She kinda… looks like a small child.

For some reason, Masachika saw his mother before him as a peer.

Like a small, hurt, scared child, trembling in fear.

"I want to hear it. Everything."

And because of that, he could now listen calmly. The image he had of his mother, cultivated from painful memories—all that unpleasant imagery—was no longer there. What remained was the gentle and timid mother Masachika knew so well.

“I want to know how you felt back then, and why you did what you did. I can handle it now, I think.”

Masachika’s earnest words were met with continued silence as Yumi kept her gaze down. Just then, there was a light knock on the door for what felt like the umpteenth time today, and Ayano entered the room, carrying a tray with two glasses and a pitcher of barley tea.

“…Shall we change locations?” Yumi suggested softly, taking the tray from Ayano.

“Ayano-san, please take care of Yuki.”

“Understood, Yumi-sama.”

Yumi left the room, swapping places with Ayano, and Masachika hurriedly followed her.

“Sorry, I’m counting on you.”

“Leave it to me, Masachika-sama.”

After briefly entrusting Yuki to Ayano’s care, Masachika followed Yumi down the hallway to her room. He was urged to sit on the sofa by the window, as Yumi placed the tray on the low table before taking a picture frame from the top of her chest of drawers. Sitting down across from Masachika, she handed him the photograph.

“…?”

Unable to read his mother’s intentions, Masachika glanced at the picture, tilting his head slightly at the unfamiliar boy and girl in the frame.

“This…”

The first thing that caught his eye was a girl who looked remarkably like Yuki at first glance. However, her slightly droopy eyes and the mole at the corner of her right eye indicated that this wasn't her, but Yumi in her early adolescent years. Right next to her, with his arm around her shoulder, was a boy smiling cheerfully.

"Uncle… Naotaka?"

Pulling the name from his hazy memory, Masachika looked up, seeing Yumi nodding quietly in confirmation.

"Yes. Onii-sama; he passed away young."

As Masachika raised his gaze, Yumi looked at him with a faint, sorrowful smile and spoke.

"Your eyes and Yuki-san's… are just like onii-sama's."

Chapter 3 - And It All Became Nothing

My older brother was an exceptionally talented person, the kind of talent the world recognized as prodigious.

He excelled in everything. Yet, despite all his accomplishments, he never flaunted them. He was cheerful, bold, and easy to get along with, regardless of who you were.

“Yumi! I put a bunch of dry ice in the bath, and it turned out amazing! Look!”

“Onii-sama, what on earth are you doing…?”

“Yumi! I made a really pretty mud dumpling, here you go!”

“Eh, I don’t want it… Wait, is that *even* a mud dumpling?”

He was a doting older brother, and despite being 3 years older than me, he always made sure to include me in his antics. I was often at the mercy of his whims, yet I loved him dearly. But as I grew older, I found myself unable to simply admire him as I used to. Because he and I… *we’re just too different*.

What my older brother could achieve, I could never hope to. The things he mastered in three days took me over a month just to learn. My older brother overflowed with talent; I was an ordinary person with none.

“It seems like you’re more or less ready for basic conversations now, Naotaka.”

“Yes, Father.”

“Good. Next week, you will come along with me to the U.S., and you will learn English through real-life practice.”

It seemed Father had caught onto this early on. He only had eyes for talent, and subsequently they were always on my older brother. Not once did he look at me.

“Naotaka-kun’s truly brilliant, isn’t he? It’s hard to believe he’s still an elementary schooler.”

“Indeed, it’s truly remarkable. I hear he’ll be entering Seirei Academy this spring after placing first in the entrance exams? The head of the family must be so proud.”

“Absolutely. The future of the Suou family is secure! By the way, about Yumi-san…”

Big family gatherings were always a struggle. All the adults would shower my older brother with praise while looking at me scornfully. And in front of them, Father always responded the same way to their criticisms in his usual curt manner.

“Yumi is a girl. Girls have their roles.”

“Haha, that’s true. Yumi-san is certainly beautiful. She won’t have trouble finding a family to marry into.”

Looking back, perhaps that was Father’s way of protecting me. But at the time, I couldn’t bring myself to see it that way.

Is my only worth being a girl?

The only thing people ever praised me for was my beauty. No one expected me to achieve anything. Rather, they assumed I wasn’t even *capable* of anything.

“No, no, Yumi’s just a late bloomer! As her older brother, I guarantee it!”

Even my older brother’s attempts to support me only added to my misery. Consumed by my inferiority complex toward him, I sometimes found myself wishing he didn’t exist—and I hated myself for even considering that.

“Don’t let it bother you, Yumi-chan. You have your own unique qualities, you know?” Mother would always comfort me, even with my head down as I endured all this invisible malice.

Unlike Father, who was strict, Mother was a gentle and easygoing person who was nothing but smiles. Even though she was the wife of a diplomat, she rarely accompanied him abroad and didn't engage in much socializing. She would always stay home, watching over my older brother and me with a warm smile.

Mother didn't understand English at all. In fact, she even often joked about how she didn't even fully grasp Japanese. Because of this, she was sometimes mocked by branch family members[11] and relatives when Father wasn't around. But even then, she'd always kept smiling as if nothing bothered her. In response, some would even openly sneer at her, saying "She doesn't even get sarcasm."

"Doesn't it make you upset, Mother?" I asked her one day.

I was upset. So I thought she had to have been as well. But even then, she just shook her head calmly.

"Not at all. You see, those people, they don't know how amazing I really am."

"Hm? Amazing?"

"Yes, they only say those things because they don't know how truly amazing I am. But *I* know I'm amazing. That's why I'm not bothered by the opinions of people who don't know anything," she assured me, puffing out her chest as she laughed.

"I *am* amazing! I'm so amazing that even a man as incredible and respectable as your father couldn't help but fall in love with me, and I gave birth to two wonderful and talented children too! Yumi-chan, *you* and Nao-kun are both amazing as well! I know that very well. So you don't need to worry about what those who know nothing have to say."

Seeing Mother speak so confidently like that, I couldn't really help but believe that she really might be an amazing person.

But I couldn't bring myself to think like her. So whenever things got too tough, I always escaped to the piano. It was the one thing I was good at, the one thing I could confidently claim I wouldn't lose to my older brother in.

Though Father still showed no interest, my older brother and Mother often praised me when I played the piano. And one day…

"Yumi-chan, you're really good at the piano. Think you have what it takes to become a professional pianist one day?" Mother asked me.

"Yeah, that'd be great! Yumi's beautiful; she'll look stunning in a dress. I think it's perfect!" my older brother followed up.

"*Ehehe*. I wonder?"

A professional pianist. Until then, all I'd done was play the piano as a form of escape, but those words felt incredibly enticing.

I couldn't become a diplomat and traverse the world in the same way Father did. But maybe, just *maaaaybe*, I could become a pianist and perform on the global stage. Then I wouldn't need to feel inferior to my older brother anymore. I wouldn't be mocked by the adults at big family gatherings. I would, with my sole talent—the piano, my only saving grace—surely accomplish something I could be proud of…

"So, I hear you want to be a pianist," Father asked me.

It was at the dining table a few days later, and I couldn't help but flinch. I was afraid he'd say it was an unworthy profession for the daughter of the Suou family, or that it was a dream beyond my reach.

But instead…

"If there's anything you need, let me know. If you want to study abroad, I'll make the necessary arrangements," he said.

"Eh—"

"Give it your all."

For the first time, it felt like Father had expectations for *me*.

So he'll support my *dream too*. Surely, this was the one path I could truly shine on.

So, from that moment on, I devoted my entire life to the piano. With the help of an exceptional teacher, whom Father had introduced me to, I achieved high praise and results at several domestic competitions. I even went on to attend an all-girls school that had an excellent music program.

And although the school's academic standards weren't particularly high, which my relatives used as another part of me to snort derisively at, finally, I no longer needed to bow my head and endure as I had before. We humans tend to become more composed when we find a place where we belong, after all.

I am amazing. Someday, I'll become a world-renowned pianist and prove them all wrong. With that thought in mind, I could smile and brush off their insults.

But, once I started attending that school itself, I found myself in an environment filled to the brim with people who had similar aspirations. And because of that, my progress stalled.

"Don't worry about it; everyone goes through a slump at some point."

"It's okay. Mother loves it when you play the piano, Yumi-chan. Someday, many people will feel the same way."

As always, Mother and older brother continued to encourage me. But to me, as someone going through her rebellious phase at the time, I only found their words irritating.

The words my older brother used to encourage me only sounded condescending when compared to the increasing number of accomplishments he gained day by day. Mother's baseless support only made me more angry too.

"You're distracting me! Just leave me alone already!"

I would always say this repeatedly, driving Mother out whenever she came to listen to me play the piano at home. For some reason, everything about Mother annoyed me back then.

You think you're some hotshot just because your husband and children are amazing?

Did that mean she had nothing to be proud of except being a wife and a mother? Was it because she had no achievements of her own that she desperately had to take pride in her husband and children? *Isn't that exactly how it's like when you're someone whose only value is being a woman?*

I don't want to end up like that.

I didn't want to live off someone else's worth—someone else's achievements—while deluding myself into thinking that I was valuable. I aspired to be someone who people admired for *my own* abilities, like Father and my older brother.

I believed that I could achieve that. After all, I, too, carried the distinguished blood of the Suou family.

Clinging on to that belief, I poured my life and soul into the piano, fighting desperately day after day, after day.

And then, about a year later—Mother passed away.

It was a week before my fourteenth birthday. She'd gone out alone to shop for my birthday present when it happened. A pair of thieves on a motorcycle attacked her, and when she resisted, she was dragged along, fell, and hit her head hard on the curb.

When the police contacted us, my older brother and I rushed to the hospital. Father, being overseas for work, wasn't there.

"Mo—Mother… Mother!"

Despite having found her so bothersome, the moment I saw her lying on that hospital bed, hooked up to machines and unresponsive, all that came to mind were her kind moments. *She was always so gentle with me. Why wasn't I kinder to her?* Regret consumed me, and I couldn't stop crying at all.

I wanted to apologize to Mother. I wanted to be kinder to her. Clutching her hand, I repeatedly begged her to wake up, futilely praying countless times to God not to take her away. But two days later, without ever regaining her consciousness, Mother passed away. Father hadn't even returned yet.

I cried so hard, out of sadness, out of frustration, to the point that I could barely breathe. My older brother, who held me tight, was crying just as much. Father did not shed a single tear.

He arrived at the hospital several hours after Mother had died, and even in front of her lifeless body, he did not cry. He calmly proceeded with the formalities. As the chief mourner at the funeral, he followed through with the service without shedding a single tear. Maybe because they saw my father like that, some people felt the need to give their superficial condolences.

"How terribly unfortunate… But Gensei-sama, you're still young. Yumi-san still needs a mother, doesn't she? How about considering a second marriage?"

"Indeed. It's essential to have a reliable partner as a diplomat, isn't it? I have someone in mind, actually…"

Some of the branch family members began suggesting a new wife for Father, even before Mother's funeral had concluded. Their brazen insensitivity was unbelievable and infuriating, and I clung to Mother's portrait, crying my heart out.

Then, suddenly, my older brother stood up, walked over to the relatives swarming around Father, and at the very next moment—

Smack!!

The raw sound of flesh being struck echoed vividly throughout the funeral hall as one of my relatives fell to the ground with a loud thud.

"Don't screw around! You people aren't even family! Don't ever show your faces here again!!" my older brother shouted, throwing back the condolence money at our stunned relatives before physically ejecting them from the funeral hall.

I had never seen my older brother so furious before or since, and I couldn't help but watch in shocked silence.

"I'm sorry Yumi. I'm so sorry. I let those scumbags hurt you all this time… I should've done this sooner," my older brother spoke with a voice overflowing with regret as he gently embraced me.

“Father, let’s cut ties with them. We don’t need those branch family members. I’ll take charge of the Suou family and do my best to run it properly. We’ll be fine without them,” he then turned to Father, reassuring him.

My older brother’s declaration was so confident, so impressive, that I felt certain he would indeed bring the Suou family to new heights as he promised.

It’ll be okay, Mother… With onii-sama here, the Suou family will be fine. And with him around, I’m sure I’ll be okay too…

I told Mother that in my heart as I clutched her portrait. Wishing for her to rest in peace, I knew that we would be alright. It was also sort of a vow to myself at the same time—a promise that I’d recover from this tragedy with my older brother. And because of that, I could never have imagined what would come next.

“See you, Yumi! I’ll be off for a bit!”

Those were the words my older brother said to me two months later as he headed to join Father overseas.

They were also the last words I would ever hear from him.

I never even had the slightest thought that he would die in a plane crash.

I didn’t even get to see his body. My older brother had a closed casket funeral, sealed shut so that no one could see what was left. Because of that, even after the funeral ended, his death didn’t even feel real to me. For days, I lived in a daze, as if trapped in a dream.

But one day, a group of men visited our manor. They were the branch family members that my older brother had effectively thrown out on the day of Mother’s funeral. That alone was enough to rip me awake from my dream, forcing me to realize the reality of the situation I was in. Now that my older brother—the heir to the Suou family—was gone, there was only one reason for their visit.

They’ll take over the family at this rate…!

I couldn't allow that. To have the people who had repeatedly insulted me and Mother to take over the family that my older brother tried so hard to protect? That was something I absolutely couldn't accept.

Driven by anger and a newfound sense of duty, I stormed to Father's study after they left.

"Father! I'm going to become a diplomat. I'll become one and take over onii-sama's place as the heir to the Suou family!" I declared to him.

But, Father simply replied, "I will not ask that of you."

Without even taking a second to consider it, he dismissed my decision.

"Don't even *think* that you can even *begin* to replace Naotaka. What I want from you is to bring a suitable husband into the Suou family. As long as you can fulfill that duty, you may do as you please," he continued.

Even when we found ourselves in such a grave situation, Father only saw me as someone who could fulfill a woman's traditional role. The thought of going down that path alone made me furious. So, I gave up my dreams of becoming a pianist…

Having basically lost everything at this point, it became painfully clear. I now understood the great lengths my Mother and my older brother had gone to to protect me this whole time. *But I won't rely on them anymore—I'll cast away my dependence.*

I would no longer be content with playing the role of "the talented brother's younger sister," with no responsibilities. By pushing myself, I'll become a capable diplomat. No, I *had* to become one. With my older brother gone, I was the only one who could save this family.

To avoid running away again, I quit playing the piano entirely. I dedicated all the time I had previously devoted to it entirely to studying. I transferred from my school's music department to its academic focused track, and threw myself into studying, day after day. And eventually, thanks to these efforts, I managed to pass the entrance exam for Seirei Academy's high school intake, where my older brother had studied.

"I did it… I did *iiiit!*"

It gave me a faint sense of hope. All I felt at that moment was the joy that came with having achieved something on my own.

But it was only short-lived. Right after I had enrolled, I was served a plate of reality during the preliminary high school exams.

I placed fourth from bottom. *No, it's just a score. The exams were unfavorable for external students like me who've just transferred in instead of being here since junior high.*

I repeatedly tried to convince myself with that, but once classes began, I could no longer spout such excuses. Despite being surrounded by other students who'd also just transferred in, I was clearly the only one who couldn't keep up.

Why? Didn't we all pass the same exam? Why am I… so far behind…?

Then, one day, it all clicked. Seirei Academy's entrance exam included an interview in addition to its written test.

Ah, that's it… I'm only here because… I'm the daughter of the Suou family…

That was the reason.

In the end, I hadn't even succeeded in getting in on my own merit.

From then on, ever since that I realized that, every day felt miserable. It was agonizing, and I constantly felt like I was somewhere I didn't belong. On top of that, my older brother, who'd been elected as student council president during junior high, was pretty much a legend at Seirei Academy.

Once word spread that I was his sister, it went from bad to worse.

"I owe your Onii-san a lot. He was huge help—"

"You don't really seem like siblings, huh? Oh, I mean, no offense, but—"

"Yumi-san, if you'd like, next time maybe I *could—"*

Virtually everyone sang praises of my older brother. They all compared me to him. There were also others who wanted to gain the favor of getting close to the sole remaining heir to the Suou family. Unable to handle their painfully obvious ill intentions, I cracked and ran away during class one day. Before I knew it, I found myself standing in front of the music room.

"Ah…"

Naturally, the piano came into view. I hadn't touched it once since my older brother died. Even though it was something I had always used as an escape whenever things got difficult.

"……"

No, I promised myself I wouldn't run away anymore. Yet, I found myself magnetically drawn to the piano. Before I knew it, I was sitting in front of it, and my fingers had already moved across the keys. As I played, memories of Mother and my older brother came flooding back. They'd always loved it when I played, after all.

Tears streamed down my face as I struck at the keys, and when I had finally finished playing, I heard audible applause from the other side of the room.

"!? Wha—?"

At that point, the person clapping, a boy, seemed to have just noticed that I was crying. With a surprised expression on his face, he stopped his applause and hurriedly searched his pocket, fumbling for his handkerchief. Frowning slightly as he looked at it, he then pulled out a packet of tissues from his other pocket.

"Um, here. If you'd like…" the boy awkwardly offered me the tissues.

Embarrassed that someone had seen me in such a pathetic state, I quickly lowered my face.

"Ah, s-sorry! I didn't mean to interrupt… I was just passing by, but it sounded so beautiful. I couldn't help it…" he awkwardly stammered.

It was the first time that someone had complimented my performance since I lost Mother and my older brother. Naturally, I looked back up without even thinking. The boy had glasses, and seemed really troubled, his gaze shifting around nervously as he continued speaking.

"Uhhh, I'm Kyotarou Kuze. And you are?" he asked, introducing himself.

"…Yumi Suou."

"Suou-san, huh? Suou-san… I feel like I've heard that name from somewhere…"

Is he going to bring up onii-sama as well? I bit my lips in dreadful anticipation, but the boy in front of me frantically waved his hands, taking my reaction the wrong way.

"S-sorry! I'm actually from a pretty average middle-class family, so I don't know much about famous upper-class people! I mean, maybe I'll recognize a name if it's from some big company or something, but…"

Someone had probably scolded him with "How could you not know my family?" or something like that before. His desperate yet clueless explanation was endearingly funny to me, and I found myself smiling a little. Seeing my smile, he shot me a slightly embarrassed one of his own in return.

That was how I met Kyotarou-san.

After that, Kyotarou-san and I often met in the music room.

"I mean, not to brag or anything, but the only thing I have going for me are my grades… So, one day, my father got *reeeally* excited, and was like, 'You can even get into Seirei Academy!' and made me take the entrance exam. And then, after I got in, I realized everyone around me was super rich! Geez~, I totally don't fit in… Well, I guess it's partly my fault for not doing my research before enrolling," he explained to me once.

Kyotarou-san and I stood out in our own ways at school. Spending time with him, someone who didn't know anything about me, was comforting. He was my way of escaping the suffocating atmosphere of the others in my class. Even after he found out about my background, he didn't change how he treated me one bit…

"So that's how it is… You've been working hard all this time, for your Onii-san too. That's really amazing."

He praised me, truly, from the bottom of his heart—

★·☆·★

"Mom, sorry, but can you gimme a sec?"

"What is it?"

"No, I'm *really* sorry. I wanted to listen quietly until the end without interrupting, but…"

"?"

"…Man, listening to my parents' chummy love story is seriously rough."

"……"

★·☆·★

In the winter of our first year of high school, Kyotarou-san confessed his feelings to me, and we began dating.

By then, he'd already understood everything about my family situation, and even expressed his desire to meet Father.

"Nice to meet you, I'm Kyotarou Kuze. I've had the privilege of dating Yumi-san for the past month now."

Kyotarou-san was honest with Father about his middle-class background. After listening to everything he had to say, Father turned to me.

"Yumi, I'd like to speak with him alone. Please step out for a moment," he said.

Because I was sent out of the room, to this day, I still don't know what they talked about. However, I suspect that Father had asked Kyotarou-san to become a diplomat.

Father had already given up on me, seeing me as an ordinary person. So, he had now set his sights on the more promising Kyotarou-san. And as if to affirm my suspicions, from that point on, Kyotarou-san abandoned his lifelong dream of becoming a police officer, instead devoting his studies to becoming a diplomat. And even though I now realized that Father had really given up on me, I still wasn't willing to give up on inheriting the Suou family in my older brother's place.

"I think that's a great idea. Let's study together then. We'll become diplomats together!"

Despite that, Kyotarou-san didn't reject my ambition at all, and we promised to work toward becoming diplomats together.

But, the more we studied together, the harder it became to sweep the looming reality under the carpet. It was painfully clear that Kyotarou-san and I were on completely different levels intellectually. He was always teaching and guiding me everytime we studied together, and I felt like I was only holding him back. Even so, I couldn't bring myself to quit and continued studying frantically… But, in the end, I failed the national civil service exam. The only one who passed was, of course, Kyotarou-san.

"Congratulations. As expected, you're really amazing, Kyotarou-san," I congratulated him.

But that was just on the surface. Looking back, it was from that moment that I began to harbor a dark feeling of inferiority toward him. Yet, there was no way I could show that. Kyotarou-san had always been kind and affectionate to me, and he continued being that way. More importantly, he made the conscious decision to give up his own dreams to become a diplomat for the sake of our future together. *So…*

"Yumi-san, all that hard work you've put into studying wasn't for nothing. You may not have become a diplomat, but from now on, you'll be the wife of one… So, I want you to support me."

I'll suppress these dark feelings deep within my chest and accept his proposal.

My married life with Kyotarou-san after that was happy. However, supporting him as a diplomat's wife, as he'd proposed, was challenging. Whenever I interacted with other diplomats, my own sense of inferiority, knowing I'd failed to become one myself, came back to haunt me. It was painful.

So, I used my pregnancy as an excuse to ask if we could return home—a place I was more familiar with. And, as usual, Kyotarou-san easily agreed with a gentle "Sure." But all his kindness did was make me feel like I was using him, and it made me miserable.

Still, after we gave birth to our two children, we enjoyed a steady, tranquil period. Our children were incredibly adorable, and though raising them, even with Natsu-san's help, was truly demanding, I felt a huge sense of fulfillment. Feeling that I was fulfilling my role as a mother chipped away at the feelings of inferiority I harbored toward Kyotarou-san. But, that only lasted until our children began to show signs of their own talents.

"Masachika-san? Wow, that's a difficult book. You're already reading things like that?"

"Hm? Yeah."

Our two children had my older brother's eyes, and were also the kind the world would call prodigies, just like him. After realizing that, Father's focus on the two of them grew exponentially, subjecting them to the same—no, even more rigorous—specialized education that he had once given my older brother.

My daughter, perhaps due to how easily she got bored, often ran away halfway through… But, my son absorbed Father's teachings at a tremendous pace and eventually became widely regarded as a prodigy.

"……"

A brilliant husband and children with exceptional talents. In this household, the only one Father overlooked, the only one who couldn't become anything… was me. My husband and children had bright futures ahead of them. They'd likely perform on grand stages, leading lives admired and praised by many.

And all I'll do is spend my life simply watching them from the sidelines. That future became evidently clear to me.

Why? Why can't I be on that stage too?

The inferiority complex I thought I'd buried deep within my chest began to swell again, day by day becoming harder to contain. It grew to the point where I was unable to control it.

Why am I the only one like this? No matter how hard I tried, I could never become like my older brother. Even though I had studied my heart out since my second year of junior high, I failed to become a diplomat. My husband, on the other hand, had only started studying with the goal of becoming one in the winter of his first year of high school. He even managed to pass the national civil service exam on his first attempt. Even both our children were born with talents that maybe even surpassed those of my husband and older brother.

Why? It's not fair.

That thought floated to the surface of my mind, and I quickly shook my head in panic.

Not only am I unhappy about my own children's talents, but going so far as to be jealous? What kind of failure of a mother am I? *No, this is something I can never let happen. These aren't my true feelings. It's just the demons inside me.*

I repeatedly told myself that and pushed these feelings back into the depths of my chest. But—

"Mother! I'm starting to study ahead for junior high today!"

“Mother! I got my black belt in karate today!”

Everytime my son innocently boasted about his accomplishments, my inferiority complex and the sense of misery that accompanied it kicked in, becoming unbearably painful. So, I turned my eyes away, ensuring those feelings would never be communicated to my children. And before I knew it, the emotions I held back from showing them were all let out at my husband instead.

“Work again!? You never even come home anymore!”

“I’m sorry. I really *do* want to spend more time with you guys, but…”

“*Argh*, come on, you’re always like that! Do you think everything will be fine as long as you apologize!?”

Why was he apologizing? The one at fault was me—this was all just unreasonable anger. Yes, my husband wasn’t beside me all the time because he was busy with his work as a diplomat, but he became one for *my* sake in the first place. He even took time off to stay in Japan at one point because I had wished for it.

He’s not at fault at all. Why won’t he get angry? Once again, I found that his kindness only made me feel even more miserable.

It was so painful—unbearably painful—that I escaped back to the piano.

“You’re amazing, Mother! So cool!”

“One more time! Play it again one more time!”

Reveling in my children’s innocent praises whenever I played the piano eased my inferiority complex, even if only a little. It made me believe that I really had at least one thing I could excel in.

If… if onii-sama hadn’t died back then…

What would’ve happened if I had continued to pursue my dream of becoming a pianist? True, I might not have become the world-famous pianist I once dreamed of. But maybe, I could have at least been regarded as top-notch—someone who was able to move many people’s hearts.

Yeah, maybe not…

All it was was pointless supposition; imagination without a real answer. Yet, to me, it was my one and only cherished fantasy. Maybe I, too, could've become someone great, someone respected by others. Perhaps I could have been someone who stood on stage alongside my family. *What a sweet and enticing daydream…*

But even that was, in the end, just a fantasy. The moment I heard my son play the piano for me that day, I was forcibly made to realize that.

"If there's anything you need, let me know. If you want to study abroad, I'll make the necessary arrangements."

"Eh—"

"Give it your all."

I finally understood it now. Father's words were not filled with hope, but rather with pity for a daughter lost in her own delusions, unaware of her limitations.

No father in this world would expect anything from me. I was, and have always had been, nothing more than an ordinary person. From the moment I was born, I was destined to be someone who could never become anything great.

It was a fact that I never wanted to know. *And yet, why do* they *make it so painfully obvious? Why do* they *make me so miserable? Their innocent smiles, with the same eyes that onii-sama once praised me with…!*

"Just stop already!!"

It took me a moment to realize that the scream I heard had come from my own mouth. But, when I saw my son's face stiffen… I knew it was already too late.

[1]: It's common in Japan, being the top-down leftard Keynesian fucks they are, for renowned politically affiliated families to employ branch families who act as "relatives" (working in conjunction with/serving the main family) despite not being related by blood.

The structure is often incredibly hierarchical, feudal-like, and anti-meritocratic in nature, and is incentivized and manufactured as a byproduct of big government policies such as centering economic growth around public spending and subsidization in conjunction with crony, state-affiliated big businesses and state manufactured monopolies/conglomerates. These entities then effectively work in tangent with the government to perpetuate anti-competitive market practices, under the guise of promoting centralized planning, while rejecting free markets, without going to the point of having a total command economy.

Chapter 4 - And Masachika Made A Decision

"Father was right. In the end, the only thing someone like me—someone ordinary—could achieve was fulfilling my role as a woman…" Yumi spoke.

Her tone no longer contained sadness or resignation. Instead, she was calm, as if she was simply just stating a universal truth.

"But still, I wanted more than that. I even became resentful of the people around me… I couldn't be a kind daughter, or a cute, loving little sister."

Yumi continued speaking while she gazed longingly at the photograph in Masachika's hands.

"Nor could I become a good wife or mother… I ended up hurting many people, including you," Yumi remarked, as a bitter sense of regret seeped into her voice.

Nonetheless, her tone remained calm, suggesting she had been forced to accept and live with this regret for many years now, as it clung to her and festered like rust.

She had lived with this crushing guilt this entire time. Repeated self-denial had solidified her despair into an indisputable fact in her mind, to the point where she could no longer feel any emotion from it. Constantly tormented by it, with no one left to ask for forgiveness, the only thing she could do was endlessly blame herself.

Ah… I get it. I get it, all too well.

Masachika found it strange how well he could relate to how it all tugged at his mother's heartstrings.

Being excruciatingly aware of his mother's situation, he felt that he had no right to blame her. How could he? Just as Yumi had been unable to face her brilliant son, Masachika couldn't face his radiant little sister either, both abandoning their loved ones because of their weakness. The sole reason his relationship with Yuki hadn't collapsed was due to her efforts alone.

If only…

If only Masachika hadn't given up on being Yumi's son, like how Yuki hadn't given up on being his sister. Even if Yumi had continued to brood in her inferiority complex, if he had persisted in reaching out to her, saying how much he loved her… What would have happened?

It goes without saying, huh?

Yuki was still able to maintain a loving mother-daughter relationship with Yumi, after all. But, Masachika didn't do that. He hadn't even tried.

Emotionally speaking, all he'd simply done was respond to Yumi's initial rejection with an even stronger one of his own. He didn't even try to understand what compelled the rejection in the first place.

If only back then, when Yumi had rejected and turned away from him, he had just a little more faith in her—in the gentle mother he had always known…

"I'm sorry for being a terrible mother."

At the very least, he wouldn't have had to hear her say something so heart-rending like this.

"*Gh…*"

His chest trembled, his throat tightened, and before he knew it, tears were streaming down Masachika's face. He couldn't even explain why.

Was it because he felt bad about his mother's past, or was it because what her words implied pained him so much? Or instead, was it because he regretted driving her to say such things? No, it wasn't one but all of these reasons, for sure.

No!

He denied his mother's words with fervor inside his head. Despite all of the resentment he'd once held toward her, Masachika fervently rejected her words of self-denial and apology.

No! You were always kind, Mom! Don't say that about yourself!!

Memories of the days before his mother awkwardly struggled to meet his gaze now flooded back to him. All he could now recall was the vivid image of the mother who'd always looked over him and his sister with immense warmth.

"*Guh… hic…*"

He wanted to deny it. He wanted to refute his mother's words immediately, but his lungs and throat refused to obey him.

Clenching his teeth, Masachika could only let out muffled sobs, while his mother, looking bewildered, continued to apologize.

"Masachika-san? I'm sorry. I'm so, so sorry…"

Not knowing about the flood of regret overtaking Masachika, Yumi blamed herself for his tears.. Even that was something Masachika could understand all too well.

Ah… Gramps was right.

Tomohisa, his paternal grandfather, had once told him that he and Yumi were alike. Now, he understood what he was getting at.

Indeed, they were similar. Both of them were susceptible to and tormented by feelings of inferiority toward people they cared about. They both were prone to averting their eyes from those that shine brilliantly, and ultimately denied themselves. Everything Yumi had spoken of, Masachika had experienced himself.

But it's different. We're not the same.

Masachika had talent. Because of that, those around him often had great expectations of him, and he was also blessed by a kind father and a gentle little sister whom he could unconditionally depend on to be by his side. But Yumi was different.

She lacked talent, and because of that, she was scorned by those around her. She lost her kind mother and dependable older brother, who had both always stood by her side, one after the other. She had practically lost her family. And in their place, those who were left swarming around her only had exploiting the Suou family's wealth and fortune in mind, so obviously full of greed. Even then, Yumi had never run away.

I ran… I chose to abandon everything to escape from the pain. To protect myself.

On the other hand, Yumi, despite facing repeated misfortunes and suffering of her own, never ran away. She never gave up and kept trying to do the best she could, even if it meant wearing herself down.

Yet, she was never ever rewarded for her efforts. Instead, they only served to wear her out even more in the end, leaving her battered and exhausted, like a shell of her former self.

It's not the same. Not at all…

How many people ever truly empathized with Yumi's suffering and have shown her understanding? Even Kyotarou had said it—he couldn't support her.

And maybe that was true. You can't truly understand someone until you've walked a mile in their shoes, after all. A person who is capable cannot understand the suffering of those who are not. Those who are strong can never comprehend the suffering of the weak. So, in that case, hadn't Yumi always been alone?

That's why… I really can't understand what Mom's been through either.

Masachika was one of the capable sorts.

But still, it was precisely because Masachika could somewhat relate even *slightly* to Yumi's feelings, that he believed that there *had* to be words he could offer. Just as Alisa had done for him when he had sunk into a downward spiral of regret, denying the very meaning of his own existence, earlier.

So, Masachika took a deep, steadying breath, regaining control over his lungs and throat, before wiping his tears and blowing his nose with the tissue Yumi offered him. After taking a gulp of barley tea, his mind felt a bit clearer.

"……"

He looked up and stared into the ceiling, trying to organize his thoughts. After a brief moment, he slowly began to speak, albeit still looking upwards.

"Me too… I've always regretted leaving this house."

He felt Yumi's gaze focus on him, but without meeting her eyes, he continued.

"I rashly left home because of my emotions and placed all my responsibilities on Yuki, who was always so frail… And then, without any goals or purpose, I just lived day after day aimlessly. I was lost. Deep down, I always thought that I was worthless," he confessed.

He still felt that way. Even now, looking back, he could only think of how shameful his life had been.

"I am who I am today because I sacrificed Yuki. And because of that, I couldn't be proud of anything I did… I just couldn't accept myself at all… But when I told Alya—my partner in the election campaign—this…"

Lowering his gaze back, Masachika looked directly into Yumi's eyes and gave a faint smile.

"She got mad at me. She told me to not deny myself—to not reject the fact I met her."

Yumi's eyes shot wide at his confession. When was the last time Masachika looked at his mother squarely in the eyes like this? As that thought drifted through his mind, he continued.

"I've lived a lazy and empty life, I really have. But, I also met others thanks to it, and I've realized I can't just dismiss *that*," Masachika explained.

He paused for a moment, then, with a sense of determination, he asked her. “Isn’t it the same for you, Mom?”

Yumi’s eyes wavered, but this time, she did not look away.

“It’s true, you couldn’t become a diplomat…” Masachika commented. “But, you met Dad, because you tried so hard to become one, right?”

Then, looking back up at the ceiling, he reflected on his own feelings and spoke slowly.

“I’ve been through a lot… But I like to think I’m happy now. And I believe that’s because I’ve met so many wonderful people.”

Maa-chan, his first love whom he met after initially leaving home. His beloved sister, Yuki, who’d shown him so many different expressions. His two best friends from Seirei Academy, Takeshi and Hikaru. The seniors and juniors he met at the student council during junior high, and the reliable seniors he became acquainted with as a member of the high school student council, upon many others. And, of course, his precious partner, Alisa.

Thanks to all of them, he managed to spend his days laughing, one way or another. Even if he had led a lazy, hedonistic, and shameful way of life, damn it they made it fun.

“So please, don’t apologize anymore. I’m the one who misunderstood this entire time. I’m sorry. Thanks for being my mother… Because of that, I was able to experience a lot of amazing things.” Masachika assured her clearly in a calm voice, locking eyes with Yumi with a small smile.

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"!"

"Oh, whoops."

Masachika froze momentarily after leaving Yumi's room, his eyes locking with Kyotarou's, who was waiting in the hallway. He quickly collected his thoughts, shut the door behind him, and, despite feeling a bit awkward, spoke in a blunt tone.

"...You came."

"Yeah, Natsu-san called me."

"Right..."

Now that Masachika thought about it, it made sense. He hadn't contacted anyone at home. It was only natural for someone to call his dad, and it was equally natural that Kyotarou came to fetch him.

"Sorry for worrying you," Masachika apologized, bowing his head, to which Kyotarou responded with his usual gentle smile.

"It's fine. Guess it was something you needed to do, amirite, Masachika?"

Bearing the front of nothing but the complete trust and understanding his father extended to him, Masachika felt a bit uneasy. Sensing this, Kyotarou shrugged his shoulders.

"But it's kinda late already... I was thinking of staying over for tonight. That okay with you?"

"Huh, oh..."

How long did we talk for? Masachika glanced at his phone to check the time; it was already past ten o'clock. Saying it was too late to head back was pushing it, at least sorta... In fact, had it been a few hours earlier, he might've insisted on going back. But...

"...Yeah, sure."

After a brief glance at the door behind him, Masachika gave his dad a small nod. Kyotarou, seemingly understanding his son's response, nodded before breaking into a kind smile, gesturing toward the stairs with his gaze.

"Anyway, your room's still vacant, so you can sleep there. I'll do the same."

"Ah, okay… I'll do that, then."

"Yep, see you later."

"…Roger," Masachika simply replied, understanding that they would have a talk later.

Hearing Kyotarou knocking on Yumi's door behind him, he headed to the stairs without turning back, descending it and running into Natsu at the bottom.

"Ah, Masachika-sama."

"…Natsu-san."

"Have you finished your conversation?" she asked him.

"Yeah, more or less."

"I understand. Then, I'll show you to your room."

Despite not needing any guidance having lived here before, Masachika chose not to say anything and followed Natsu.

"You need not worry about Yuki-sama. Ayano and I will take good care of her," Natsu reassured him.

"Thank you very much. I appreciate it."

"Not at all. It's my duty as a servant, after all."

They reached the room just as they finished talking, and as Natsu urged him, Masachika stepped inside. It'd been several years since he'd last stepped in this room, but it was just as he remembered it, meticulously maintained in the same state it had been in all those years ago.

“Please take your time. The bath is ready whenever you wish, and the change of clothes that Kyotarou-sama brought over for you is right there,” Natsu said, pointing to the clothes on the bed.

“Oh, thanks…”

“Not at all. Please don’t worry about it. Now, if you’ll excuse me,” Natsu said, leaving the room.

With that, Masachika, now alone, took another look around.

“……”

The wallpaper and furniture featured calm color palettes. Study materials lined the bookshelves instead of manga and picture books. It was a room devoid of anything remotely playful, lacking any essence of childhood. In fact, his current room was probably more childlike in comparison.

“What were they thinking, leaving it like this…”

With such an interior, the room could have easily been repurposed as a guest room. Yet, the small stool placed in front of bookshelves, still filled with textbooks for an elementary and junior high school student, suggested otherwise.

“Maybe it’s for when Yuki has children someday?” Masachika muttered.

It was a prediction he didn’t even truly believe in himself. As he sat on the bed, part of him felt like just falling asleep right then and there, but there was still something lingering in the back of his mind that made him hesitant to relax that quickly. He still didn’t quite feel like this was his room anymore.

But man… That really came out of nowhere…

He attended Alisa’s birthday party, greeted her parents, unexpectedly revealed his past to her, and then, after visiting the Suou manor together, he talked with his mother for the first time in years. And now, he was staying over.

“I’d never believe it if I told myself this would happen this morning…”

Even now, it still felt slightly unreal. His head throbbed with a faint sense of warmth, and his whole body felt oddly unsteady, as if he was floating mid air. He wasn't sure if it was fatigue from crying or his brain being overwhelmed by the whirlwind of events.

"It's been a few hours… So yeah, no surprise, I guess…" he whispered.

Surrendering to the exhaustion that had built up over today's events, he collapsed backward onto the bed.

Though the room looked like a relic of his childhood, frozen in time, it was clear that it had been regularly cleaned—there wasn't even a speck of dust in the air. The soft comforter and the firm mattress beneath it supported Masachika's body perfectly.

"……"

The sheets were cool, and the feeling of them being ruffled against his neck felt strangely comforting. Immersed in that sensation, he gazed up at the ceiling so familiar from his childhood.

"I've really… come back, huh?"

The familiar scent. The familiar scenery. The familiar touch. Feeling all of that coursing throughout his body, the reality of the situation gradually seeped into his mind.

He couldn't help but think about how drastically the day had changed in just a few hours.

But…

It was never time or effort that held him back from redeeming himself, he just needed to gather the courage to step forward.

Even though Masachika had once thought that he would never recover his relationship with his mother, all he had to do was try. It turned out that it was possible to mostly repair said relationship in less than half a day.

"No… Saying it's 'repaired' might be a li'l bit of a stretch."

Even Masachika hadn't fully resolved his lingering resentment toward Yumi. His words of forgiveness—the gratitude he'd expressed earlier—weren't lies… Or at least, he didn't think they were. But, just because he had made the conscious decision to forgive his mother, didn't mean his heart would instantly follow suit. His unpleasant impressions of her had accumulated into several solid layers over a long period, and couldn't be scraped off so easily.

Similarly, Yumi would probably take some time to feel something other than overwhelming guilt when looking at him too. In reality, she probably wasn't the type of person who could instantly act normally just because she was told she didn't need to apologize anymore. Rather, she would be the type to think, "How could I have ever treated my son this way?"

Because at the end of the day, Masachika himself was no different.

I guess I'll have to leave that to Dad…

Thinking about how his parents were most likely talking right now, Masachika closed his eyes.

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"I see… So Masachika did that…" Kyotarou nodded slowly after Yumi had summarized her interaction with Masachika to him.

Sitting across from him, Yumi kept her head lowered, speaking in a self-deprecating tone.

"He really is kind and wise… It's thanks to you, Kyotarou-san. You've really raised him well, I suppose…"

"Haha, I wonder about that… You know me don't you? About how I tend to take the more laissez-faire approach with parenting," Kyotarou said, his laugh contrasting Yumi's somber demeanor.

“To me, the role of a parent is to simply watch over their child and support them. The only thing a parent *must* do is take responsibility when they cause issues. At least, that’s the kinda person I am. Masachika becoming a kind person is thanks to him alone. And the people he’s met along the way…”

“Is… that so? No, maybe you’re right… Yuki-san is like that too…”

Cutting her words there, Yumi raised her head and gazed out of the window.

“Really… Why couldn’t I just believe Mother…” Yumi whispered, looking back at the distant past, filled with regret.

“Being blessed with such wonderful children… to take pride in being their mother, and to be proud of their growth—that’s all I should’ve needed, so why…”

And with that, she fell silent.

“Even so, it’s not too late,” Kyotarou declared.

He spoke clearly, with conviction, to the still-silent Yumi.

“…I wonder if that’s true.”

“Yes, it is. Masachika has already forgiven you, after all. Plus, it’s obvious that Yuki loves you a lot, isn’t it?”

“But…”

Yumi hesitated as she glanced at Kyotarou’s face. Sensing exactly what she meant, Kyotarou gave a gentle smile.

“I’ve never once resented you, Yumi-san,” he reassured her.

Then, taking Yumi’s hand that was resting on her lap, he looked her in the eyes and continued to speak.

“Besides, you’re always speaking of me as if I’m some great person, Yumi-san… But that’s not true at all. I was just a guy who was a bit better at studying than most—and that’s all I had. I just worked hard to become a man worthy of you… that’s all.”

“Worthy of me? What do you mean… My family might be famous, but I’ve always been nothing special myself…” Yumi replied self-deprecatingly.

“Haha, *you’re* the only one who’s ever thought that way, Yumi-san. Back then, all the boys at school were all so eager to get close to you.”

“That’s only because I was the sole heir of the Suou family…”

“There were only a *handful* of boys who thought of you like that. You just didn’t realize it, Yumi-san, but to most of us, you were like some unbelievably unattainable flower.”

At the very least, that was the truth for Kyotarou.

He had met a girl in the music room, crying as she played the piano, and was immediately captivated at first sight. But after asking around, he quickly learned that she was completely out of his league.

She was the daughter of the Suou family; a family known for its immense prestige. She possessed a graceful and refined demeanor that lived up to her family’s name, and her cultured elegance was evident in everything she did. Her feminine body lines and melancholic beauty were irresistibly alluring, and stirred intense feelings of protectiveness and possessiveness in the many boys who laid sight upon her. And among them, Kyotarou by far had the least to offer.

“I was just some average joe from a middle-class family. I had nothing except for good grades… No status, no money, I didn’t really have any remarkable looks, and I wasn’t even that athletic. I had no special talents to be proud of; I was far from being a suitable match for you, Yumi-san. That’s why, I became a diplomat just so I could become a man who could somehow hope to be worthy of you…”

In fact, he had once even aimed to join the Raikokai like how Gensei did, but that goal was never realized. Therefore, becoming a diplomat was the bare minimum effort he could’ve made in order to stand by Yumi’s side.

“That’s why, Yumi-san, there’s no need for you to feel guilty about anything. Because everything I did, I did to marry you,” he guaranteed her.

“K-Kyotarou-san…”

Yumi’s eyes widened and she froze. In front of her, Kyotarou knelt down. Then, under the moonlight, he looked straight up at Yumi and spoke.

“Yumi-san, I—”

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Knock, knock, knock.

“!”

Startled by the sound of knocking, Masachika opened his eyes, realizing that he’d inadvertently fallen asleep.

Feeling an indescribable sense of embarrassment at dozing off in such a state, he quickly sat up.

“Yes?” he called out.

“Comin’ in.”

With those words, Kyotarou entered the room. He glanced at Masachika, who was awkwardly sitting on the edge of the bed, before shifting his gaze toward the ruffled sheets, indicating someone had clearly slept on them. Without commenting on that, Kyotarou took a seat in the chair by the study desk.

“I heard about it all from Yumi-san. Thanks for forgiving her.”

“…It’s nothing,” Masachika responded curtly, thinking for a moment before continuing. “I mean, after talking to her, I realized that… Mom’s kinda like me? An ordinary person, or something like that. I know that sounds weird, but…”

He looked up at the ceiling, reminiscing about the days he’d spent in this house, and narrowed his eyes.

“People really *can* understand each other if they just talk, no matter who it is… I should’ve known that.”

It was a principle Gensei had taught him with the goal of eventually becoming a diplomat. So why did he think that it didn't apply to his own mother?

No. I guess I just didn't want to reconcile from the start and excluded every possibility of talking it out.

But then, thinking about it that way, what about Gensei? By that logic, even with his grandfather—who, at least from Masachika's perspective, seemed like the stubborn rationalist type—there may be room for a proper discussion.

But just having that opportunity to talk isn't good enough…

Masachika was not just thinking about having a simple conversation, after all. He wanted to negotiate with Gensei in getting him to make concessions.

"…Dad."

"Hm?"

"What kind of person… is Granddad to you?" Masachika asked.

Despite asking this so abruptly, Kyotarou didn't ask him to clarify his question further.

"A man of conviction, I suppose," he answered clearly after a brief pause.

He then continued slowly, as if confirming each word.

"To your grandfather, the prosperity and continuity of this family is of utmost importance… Above all else. He walks that path single-mindedly, and sees it as his only mission."

That explanation made sense to Masachika—or rather, it matched the impressions he already had of his grandfather. Nevertheless, to Masachika, there was another less flattering way to describe Gensei.

A cold rationalist who prioritizes upholding conviction above anything el—

“Don’t get me wrong… Your grandfather doesn’t completely lack love for his family, y’know? He’s simply thinking about us in his own way. He wouldn’t have allowed Yuki to visit our apartment this frequently otherwise, dontchu think?” Kyotarou spoke as he furrowed his eyebrows, having seemingly read his son’s own thoughts.

“……”

Masachika had considered that once, too. Even though Gensei had forbidden Masachika from calling himself Yuki’s brother in public, he’d completely turned a blind eye to Yuki acting like Masachika’s sister. That itself was unusually lenient, at least for someone like Gensei.

But…

Couldn’t that just be some sorta carrot-and-stick strategy to keep Yuki motivated? Masachika thought about that cynical idea reflexively, but he quickly dismissed it. After all, it was his father who was saying this, so he felt he should at the very least set aside his preconceived notions and trust his father’s judgment for now.

“But I mean… in the end, for him, doesn’t the future of this family always come first?”

“…Yep, that’s true. Can’t deny that.”

“I see.”

Masachika nodded at Kyotaro’s affirmation, but he didn’t feel disappointed; quite the opposite. For the current Masachika, it was more convenient that Gensei’s priorities lay where they did.

“Dad.”

“Hm?”

“I—”

Masachika braced himself, conveying his intentions to his father: what he planned to do from now on, and what he planned to achieve. He detailed a crucial decision that would greatly influence the course of his life. Of course, Kyotarou listened intently till the very end.

“What do you think?”

Having explained his plan, Masachika examined his father's face anxiously with uncertainty and apprehension.

And in response…

"Yep, sounds good to me. Don't worry about your ol' dad here—just do what you believe is best."

He nodded with his usual gentle smile.

Chapter 5 - And Then The Act Became Reality

The next morning.

A strange tension hung over the dining room of the distinguished Suou manor.

Seated at the end of the long table was the head of the household, Gensei Suou; his daughter, Yumi; her former husband, Kyotarou; and their son, Masachika, who had been effectively estranged from the family for several years at this point.

To anyone who was even vaguely familiar with their rough history, this odd group would have certainly raised a few eyebrows. Yet, despite already being about ten minutes into breakfast, things remained surprisingly calm, with no sign of any turmoil—just peaceful exchanges.

“Speaking of which, last month’s meeting went smoothly thanks to your advice Gensei-san. I appreciate it.”

“I see. Was Grader the same as usual then?”

“Yes. If anything, he’s been even more energetic ever since his grandchild was born.”

Still, the only ones actually engaged in conversation were Kyotarou and Gensei, while Masachika and Yumi quietly ate their breakfast. Natsu and Ayano, who were serving the four, kept to themselves and diligently went about their duties.

“Masachika-sama, would you like another slice of bread?” Ayano asked.

“No, I’m fine. Thank you.”

“Certainly.”

Her question was discreet and subtle, clearly striving not to interrupt the conversation. Every movement she made was smooth, efficient, and inconspicuous. Seeing her seemingly flawless poise, Masachika found it hard to believe that she had spent the entirety of last night alternating with Natsu to care for Yuki. At just fifteen, Ayano's serving skills had reached remarkable levels.

But…

"!♡"

Every time she spoke to Masachika, she shivered with a visible tremor.

Keep it together, Ayano… Your excitement's showing all over.

Though she remained expressionless as usual, Masachika could easily tell she was swimming in satisfaction and elation. Her demeanor practically screamt, "I can't believe I'm serving Masachika-sama right now…!" He could sense her glowing in the background, lost in that lingering feeling, her gaze adrift.

To Ayano, serving Masachika to the utmost of her abilities was far more significant than the fact that Gensei and Masachika were sitting at the same table for the first time in years.

I mean, thank god she's really trained that unshakable composure of hers. Yep, gotta upgrade her from a 5M to a 6M[1] *by givin' her the "my own pace" trait.*

While entertaining that thought, albeit briefly, he inadvertently smiled slyly before quickly straightening himself.

Whoops, got a little too relaxed there. Well, no one noticed so it's fine, I guess.

Glancing at Gensei and Kyotarou, who were still engaged in their conversation, Masachika shrugged slightly.

"Masachika-san. Is something the matter?" Yumi suddenly spoke up.

Masachika, caught off guard by the unexpected question, widened his eyes and turned around. And he wasn't the only one; both Gensei and Kyotarou stopped talking for a moment. Though they resumed shortly after, as if nothing of note had happened, it was obvious Yumi's words had startled them.

But Masachika was in no state to notice them as he found himself staring intently at Yumi, tilting his head slightly.

"Uh, what d'you mean?"

"Well, it just looked like you were smiling a little…"

Masachika was stunned into silence by Yumi's words. Her hesitation around him was still apparent in her wandering gaze as she spoke, struggling to make eye contact.

Caught off guard, Masachika could only respond honestly.

"No, I just found it funny that Ayano looked kinda excited…"

"!?"

He could sense Ayano immediately straightening her posture behind him, as Yumi turned her gaze toward her.

"Ayano-san? Is that true?"

"Y-yes. I was just so delighted to be able to serve Masachika-sama again today that… perhaps it showed in my behavior a little. I apologize."

"No, you don't need to apologize, but…" Yumi trailed off, looking a bit awkward as Ayano bowed her head earnestly.

At that moment, Natsu intervened with a playful comment.

"Ayano? It's good to be earnest, but I think instead of apologizing, being a bit bashful here would be more appropriate, don't you think?"

"Bashful… Is that so?"

Following Natsu's half-joking advice, Ayano placed her hands on her cheeks without changing her expression. After thinking for a moment, she posed slightly.

“Po.”

“What are you, Hachishakusama[2] or something?”

“Hachishakusama? What’s that?”

“Nevermind.”

“??”

Ayano, with her hands still pressed to her cheeks, made a puzzled expression as Kyotarou chuckled at her reaction.

“You two get along well, don’t you?”

“…I mean, we *are* childhood friends.”

As Masachika said this, he immediately glanced over at Gensei to gauge his reaction. Surprisingly, he didn’t seem particularly displeased, and continued eating in silence. Relieved that his banter hadn’t soured the mood, Masachika continued to look for the right opportunity to speak to him.

When coffee was served after the meal, Masachika made up his mind.

The important thing to understand at this moment was for him to be aware of his standing (or lack thereof) in the family. Right now, Masachika was not here as Gensei’s grandson but rather as Yuki’s friend from school. Keeping this in mind, he chose his next words carefully.

“Gensei-san.”

Masachika sensed the shifting atmosphere of the room as he addressed Gensei. Hearing Masachika distantly addressing his own grandfather by his first name, both Yumi and Natsu furrowed their brows as they glanced back and forth between the both of them. Meanwhile, Kyotarou maintained his usual calm demeanor, and Gensei, too, showed no particular change in expression as he turned his face toward Masachika.

“What is it?”

“I’m very sorry for the sudden request, but could I have about thirty minutes of your time after this?”

"…Very well."

Nodding in agreement, Gensei stood up without even touching the coffee that had just been brought in.

"We'll change locations. Bring the coffee to my study," he instructed Natsu.

"Understood."

As Natsu picked up the tray, Gensei cast a sharp glance down at Masachika.

"Follow me."

Uttering those words, he turned on his heel and began walking away without waiting for a response. Masachika followed suit, quickly getting up while trying his best to not appear too hasty or rude. As he passed behind Kyotarou, he felt a light tap on his lower back.

"!"

Looking down, he saw Kyotarou nodding at him with his patented gentle expression. Having received his father's silent encouragement, Masachika nodded in return before leaving the room, following Gensei's lead.

Crap, I should've held the door open for Natsu-san.

It was only when he heard the faint sound of Natsu leaving the room while carrying the two cups of coffee on a tray behind him did he realize his small lapse in manners. Looks like the tension was really getting to him more than he thought.

Still, I guess the fact I noticed means I still have some *composure left in me.*

Analyzing himself with that strange sense of detachment, Masachika followed Gensei into his study. This time, he made sure to hold the door open behind him so as to help Natsu in.

"Thank you very much, Masachika-sama."

"You're welcome."

“Please excuse me.”

Giving a final bow at the entrance, Natsu placed the two cups of coffee on the front of Gensei’s desk, while he stood on its other side.

“I’ll place them here.”

“Yes, thank you for your trouble.”

“It’s my pleasure.”

Having received Gensei’s brief expression of gratitude from behind her, Natsu left the room with the empty tray. After a short few seconds, Gensei slowly turned to face Masachika.

“So, what is it that you want?” he inquired, his eyes radiating a cold, harsh gleam.

There was not a shred of the affection you’d normally expect from a grandfather in front of his grandchild, yet simultaneously, he showed not a hint of hostility or resentment toward someone who’d practically abandoned his own family. Relieved at the thought, Masachika spoke with determination—with words that would shape his future.

“I’ll get straight to it. I wish to be reinstated as the successor to the Suou family.”

It was something he’d firmly resolved to do last night as he held his crying, bedridden little sister. He couldn’t allow himself to sacrifice her wellbeing anymore. The responsibility that was originally his to bear from the beginning—he would no longer force her to carry it.

If it meant his sister could be set free, then he had no problem with dedicating his life to the family; a life that held no particular passion or dream.

“……”

After hearing Masachika’s demand, Gensei’s eyebrow twitched slightly, and the atmosphere around him transformed. He was no longer simply the grandfather of the Suou family, entertaining his granddaughter’s friend, but rather *the* authoritative head of the household.

“I’ve treated you as my granddaughter’s friend since yesterday… Have you been aware of what that implies?” he questioned Masachika.

His voice, now clear as a bell, held an intimidating tone.

“Of course.”

Masachika answered straight back, without yielding to the pressure. Gensei slowly took a few menacing steps closer, glaring down at Masachika with a fierce, domineering aura.

“Then, from this point on, I will treat you like the deserter you are… You do understand that you would have absolutely no right to complain if I throw you out this instant, correct?”

The pressure that he exuded, at such a close range at that, was enough to make even a grown man shrink. Yet, despite this, Masachika did not flinch even once, and faced Gensei’s gaze directly. Silently confirming that there was still no hostility or resentment in those eyes, he once again felt a faint sense of relief.

Gensei’s intimidation was entirely a formality. The man before Masachika, above all, was a pragmatic realist.

There’s no need to be scared.

“You say that, but we both know you won’t throw me out. Because accepting my proposal would be beneficial for the Suou family’s future.”

Silently looking down at the vividly unshaken Masachika, Gensei could offer no response of his own. A tense silence, lasting only a few seconds, filled the room.

Then, Gensei abruptly turned on his heel. He moved around to the other side of the desk and sank heavily into his chair, which creaked under his weight. Clasping his hands on the desk, he relaxed his intimidating demeanor ever so slightly.

“Very well. I’ll at least hear what you have to say. What possible benefit is there to the Suou family in reinstating you?”

Prompted to continue, Masachika approached the desk and declared matter-of-factly.

“It’s simple. The Suou family will gain a more capable successor than what it currently has.”

At such an audacious declaration, Gensei narrowed his eyes as he leaned back in his chair.

“Indeed, in terms of innate talent, Yuki is no match for you,” he began to speak in a calm, flat tone, “But that’s all.”

He acknowledged Masachika’s natural brilliance, but that was all he had going for him.

“For the past six years, Yuki has consistently exceeded the expectations I had set for her. And what about you? Since leaving this household, what have you accomplished?”

Gensei continued mercilessly, as if seeing through every lazy, self-indulgent day Masachika had lived.

“You haven’t studied, you haven’t refined yourself, you haven’t even built anything. You left your talent to rust and neglected the responsibilities of someone blessed with such gifts. And yet, you claim to be the better successor? Don’t be so arrogant,” he spat these words out.

But right after, he immediately returned to speaking in an even, calm tone.

“Moreover, you are someone who has abandoned this household. Reinstating someone like you, would not only mean disregarding Yuki, its current successor, but undermine *my* own decision as the head of the Suou family. I would never follow through with such a resolution that would only serve to tarnish our reputation.”

“That’s a lie. If that were truly the case, you would’ve already thrown me out without listening to what I have to say,” Masachika responded succinctly to Gensei’s decisive words.

After directly refuting Gensei’s argument, he then proceeded to explain his own reasoning.

“Bringing me back wouldn’t tarnish the Suou family’s name. After all, this household’s known for valuing absolute rationality and meritocracy.”

Masachika believed Gensei to be a cold-hearted rationalist, but that impression was not his alone. Gensei—and indeed, the entire Suou family as a whole—were perceived the same way by the upper echelons of this country. Highly capable, but without a trace of sentimentality, even toward members of their own family—a cold-blooded clan.

Masachika himself had experienced that first hand. After all, once he had left the Suou family Gensei had treated him as if he'd never even existed. Even though Masachika was once a favored grandson, the moment he became an outsider, Gensei mercilessly erased his very existence, leaving Masachika to disappear from public knowledge. That coldness was the essence of the Suou family. And it's because of that, even if the role of successor was to now be transferred from Yuki to Masachika, it would not be considered out of the ordinary. As long as there was a reasonable, justifiable explanation.

"I left this household, you say? Rather than that, you—no, the Suou family—should be focused more on who's more suited to be its successor now," Masachika asserted.

"Even so, it does not change the fact that you are unfit to be this family's successor. I have no reason to evaluate someone like *you*, who has achieved nothing," Gensei responded calmly, neither affirming nor denying Masachika's claims.

"It's true, compared to when I was still a part of this household, I have been living an idle life… But I wasn't doing 'nothing.' And from now on, I'll produce results that you—and everyone else—will have to accept."

With that, Masachika placed his hands on the desk, firmly meeting Gensei's gaze.

"I will use the experience and connections I've gained during my time supporting Yuki as the vice president in junior high to get Alisa Kujou elected as Seirei Academy's high school student council president. Then, I'll oust Yuki and gain my place in the Raikokai. That'll be the result I show you."

He didn't even attempt to appeal to emotions. It would never work with someone like Gensei.

“After winning two consecutive elections with different partners and securing my entry into the Raikokai, it’ll be clear who is more suited for the role. Yuki, on the other hand, would’ve lost the election and failed to gain entry into the Raikokai, having lost my support. This result will make it clear which of us is better suited for the role.”

Masachika made no attempt to humble himself. After all, that was not how he’d learned to negotiate from Gensei in the first place.

So Masachika did not bow his head. Instead, he simply looked straight at Gensei declared once again.

“I’ll say it again. If I defeat Yuki in the upcoming election and secure entry into the Raikokai, I demand that you reinstate me as the successor of the Suou family.”

Gensei stared back into Masachika’s eyes, and for a moment, an extended silence hung in the air… Until finally, Gensei slowly spoke.

“…Very well.”

“!”

“If you manage to defeat Yuki in the upcoming election, and earn your right to enter the Raikokai… I will once again welcome you in as a member of the Suou family.”

Hearing that much, Masachika began to feel a slight sense of relief. However—

“But if it comes to that, I will not immediately name you successor. You and Yuki will then be treated as candidates on equal footing for succession.”

—He quickly stiffened his posture again after hearing Gensei’s terms.

In other words, achieving electoral victory would only mean securing his spot at the startling line for the race for succession. But that wasn’t a problem at all. After all, Yuki most likely had no interest in the position of Suou family head, nor was she particularly eager to become a diplomat. With no reason to compete, she would simply forfeit, allowing Masachika to win by default.

“That’s fine with me.”

This time, Masachika finally allowed himself to feel relieved. But, not allowing it to show on his face, he straightened his posture and nodded.

But the conversation wasn’t over yet.

“However, I will not recognize your victory if it’s as the vice president.”

“Wha—?”

“It’s only natural. If you’re claiming to defeat Yuki, then you must compete on equal footing as a candidate for student council *president*,” Gensei stated firmly.

He made it clear he would not entertain any more objections, leaving Masachika speechless at the unexpected condition.

“If you defeat Yuki in the election, successfully lead the student council as its president for a year, and earn the necessary qualifications to stand as a member of the Raikokai… then, and only then, will I recognize you as a candidate to be my successor.”

★·☆·★

“……”

The ticking of the clock’s second hand quietly marked the passage of time.

Having finished his discussion with Gensei, Masachika visited Yuki’s room, watching over his still-sleeping sister.

According to Ayano, who’d been nursing Yuki all night with Natsu, her fever had already subsided and her consciousness seemed clear. And she was right. Yuki’s complexion looked much better than it had yesterday, and her breathing was now steady.

Maybe the medicine’s kicked in…

As Masachika thought about that while silently expressing his gratitude to Ayano, who was currently taking a nap, Yuki's eyes suddenly shot wide open from the bed.

"……"

She gazed blankly at the ceiling, before forming some words with her dry lips.

"I had a dream."

"What kind?"

"Basically, I was this trainee exorcist priestess and someone handed this seemingly ordinary bamboo stick to me. But like, it actually turned out to be this bamboo spear used to execute Christians on the run—the 'Spear of Longinus, the Saint Killer'! Well, at least one of them."

"What the heck kinda dream is that!?" Masachika snapped back while leaning forward a bit.

Completely ignoring him, Yuki continued to stare intently at the ceiling, showing no signs of stopping.

"…I know this ceiling."[3]

"Don't start spouting shit the moment you wake up!"

With his little sister already acting like her usual self, Masachika momentarily forgot all about his exchange with Gensei and continued to fire back with his usual retorts.

Suddenly, Yuki smirked, threw off her blanket, and stood up in one swift motion, unraveling her braided hair with a dramatic sweep. Her long black hair billowing out like a jet-black cape.

With an air of absolute confidence, Yuki put both hands on her hips, puffed out her chest, and stood firmly.

"I'm so baaack!!" she proudly declared.

"You're still like in a kinda sealed state, so calm down already~"

"Who're you callin' the Demon King!?"

“It’s actually a god; a Demon God.”[4]

“*Mm-hmm*, alright, alright. Hey, bring me some water, you worm.”

“Don’t get carried away! I’ll seal you for real again this time, you know!?”

“Hah, I dare you to!”

With that, Masachika swiftly grabbed the blanket and wrapped Yuki, who up until that point had been looking down at him with a haughty smile, in under three seconds.

Blinking rapidly in surprise, Yuki then started wriggling like a caterpillar, flailing around.

“*Ugaaaaahhh!* Screw you, screw *youuuuu!* How dare a lowly creature like you seal me twice!”

“Higher beings who treat humans like lower lifeforms always get beat in fantasy stories, you know?”

“*Grrr*… I won’t forget this. I *absolutely* won’t forget this slight… No matter how many years it takes, I’ll definitely come back and take over this world—”

“Alright, alright. That’s enough.”

“—*Mubffgh*.”

Masachika threw a pillow at his sister’s face in an attempt to cut her off in the middle of her act. However…

“*Nyooo!* He’s gonna kill me! He’s tryna make it look like a natural death by suffocating *meeeee!* Jokes on you, you won’t get any inheritance even if I’m dead!”

“Stop acting like you’re in some TV drama!”

Masachika then abruptly pulled the pillow away from Yuki’s face as she started a whole new act, before letting out a big sigh.

“Seriously though, you haven’t even completely recovered yet. Take it easy already… Your throat still hurts, amirite?” he spoke with a hint of exasperation.

“*Tsk*… Well, yeah.”

Yuki pouted slightly and nodded at Masachika’s earnest words, letting out a resigned sigh of her own.

“I got it already… I’ll behave, so can you at least untie me?”

“You’d stir up more shit the moment I do that. Denied.”

“Then, is it okay if I just… do it here like this?”

“Do what?”

“Hint: holy water.”

“Like hell it is!”

Masachika swiftly pulled off the blanket as Yuki rolled over on the bed with an exaggerated “Oh my~.” Landing with a thud on the floor, she stood up next to the bed with her arms raised diagonally upward, striking a finishing pose like some gymnast after her act. She then glanced over her shoulder at Masachika, as if checking for a reaction.

“…No, I ain’t givin’ you points for shit. It wasn’t even *that* artistic.”

“What? Should I have stripped while rolling and posed naked instead?”

“That would get you immediately disqualified in any competition! Just hurry up and do your business!”

“In onii-chan’s room?”

“In the toilet!!”

Giggling, Yuki left the room. Watching her go, Masachika let out a sigh—a mix of exasperation and relief. Pulling out his phone, he sent a text to Ayano informing her that Yuki had woken up.

He poured water from the pitcher into a cup he had brought along and waited for her to come back. Soon enough, Yuki returned, apparently having washed her face while she was at it.

“Ahh~ How refreshing.”

“Here, water.”

“Thank you~”

Yuki took the cup from Masachika’s hand and downed it in one gulp.

“Phew… Wait a minute.”

Then, peering at Masachika’s face, she blinked a few times.

“Onii, why’re you here?” she asked.

“You just noticed!? We even had that conversation yesterday, remember!?”

“In the toilet?”

“In *this* room! And what d’you mean in the toilet!?”

“Like… going to it together?”

“That’s not a thing you’d do with a guy!”

“Going to it together (with implications)?”

“Okay, I get it. No need to say more.”

“*Hehe*, you better keep your voice down or someone will hear us.”

“I told you, shut up already!”

“Alrighty, sit there… *Hehe*, you did well, didn’t you? Good boy, good boy.”

“I’m tellin’ you—”

“*Hehe*, maybe it’s time to stop using diapers?”

“Oh, so it was ’bout potty training a toddler. My bad.”

“What did ya think it was~?”

“…Nursing care.”

“That’s a bit of a stretch for an excuse, bruzza.”

“Can it. Keep it up, and I’ll wrap you up again.”

“Hah! You really think the same trick will work on me twice? You really underestimate me—”

Packaging complete.

“…It’s hot in here.”

“Nothin’ wrong with breaking a sweat every now and then. You just had some water too.”

“I see… So you’re trying to trigger a wipe-down event by making me sweat.”

“Can you at least drop the whole otaku brainrot while you’re sick.”

“Too bad! I’ve already asked Ayano for some hot water and towels in case somethin’ like this happened!”

“The heck kinda ridiculous, over-the-top thinking is that?”

Just as Masachika said this, a knock came about the room door. As he responded with a “Come in,” Ayano entered, carrying a basin of hot water and a towel.

“Here you are, Yuki-sama.”

“Ayano~! Perfect timin’!”

“My pleasure.”

“Huh, weren’t you supposed to be taking a nap?”

“Yes. But I’m fine now.”

“No, get some sleep. You only slept for like four hours yesterday, right? I’ll take care of Yuki…” Masachika said, taking the basin and towel from Ayano’s hands.

Ayano hesitated as he placed them by the bed, her gaze shifting slightly.

“But…”

“Ayano, onii-chan here says he wants to wipe me down himself.”

“! Understood. In that case, I’ll return to my room.”

“Don’t just accept it blindly like that!”

Ignoring Masachika’s objection, Ayano swiftly left the room. As he stood there, stunned by her speed, he felt a tug on his shirt from the side.

Looking over, he saw Yuki, sitting on the bed with her knees together like a proper young lady, looking up at him shyly with her head slightly lowered.

“Onii-sama? Could you… wipe my back?”

“Since when did you get out!?”

“Heh, it’s common knowledge that you’d build a bigger resistance and the duration of being restrained gets shorter each time, right?”

“In games, sure. When did you stop being human?”

“Eh? Are you sayin’ I’m too cute to be human?”

“If you’re talking about Alya or Masha, maybe. But *you’re* definitely still in human territory.”

“*Hm?* Talking ’bout other women now?”

“I did, and what of it?”

“A punch to the groin, I suppose.”

“Oh for fucks sake—!”

Receiving a light smack to his groin, Masachika instinctively bent inward and leaped back. Though it didn’t hurt, as there was no real force behind it, the sudden sensation of having a vulnerable spot touched sent a chill down his spine, and he glared at Yuki with a resentful look. Facing his glare, Yuki, in turn, made her eyes glisten with fake tears, pulled the blanket close to her, and began to tremble.

“What’s wrong, onii-sama…? Yuki’s scared… Can you go back to being the kind onii-sama you usually are?”

“You say that after punching me in the groin?”

“The… groin? Onii-sama, what are you talking about…? *Cough*, *cough*, Yuki doesn’t understand…”

“Don’t act sick just for this.”

“Yuki doesn’t understand. Not at all… Cough, cough.”

As Yuki continued her blatantly fake performance, Masachika sighed deeply, closing his eyes in exasperation.

“Let’s see… A character who’s just listed as the ‘younger sister’ in her profile summary, but actually turns out to be a stepsister once the story actually starts,” he muttered quietly.

“You bastard! I’ll kill *youuuuu!!*”

Right at that moment, Yuki immediately threw off her act of being the pure, small-animal-type little sister character and lunged at Masachika. While kneeling on the bed, she grabbed him by the collar and glared at him with wide, angry eyes.

“Listen up… You hear me? A stepsis is fine as a stepsis. Whether she’s become one because of their parents’ remarriage, so you were like strangers to begin with, or if she was taken in and raised like family, but where you could still marry her—both have their own appeal. But, in that case, make it absolutely clear from the beginning that she’s a ‘stepsister’… Don’t you go misleading people into thinking she’s a real one…!” she whispered in a threatening, low voice from a close range.

“You’re way too serious about this; you’re scaring me.”

“Hah?”

“No, seriously. What’re you threatening me for?”

As Yuki continued to glare daggers at him, Masachika looked back at her with a blank, unimpressed stare, even while she held onto his shirt.

“A tamed monster that suddenly speaks fluently the moment it evolves or gains telepathy,” Yuki suddenly muttered in retaliation.

“I’ll kill *youuuuu!!*”

Now it was Masachika’s turn to immediately grab his sister by her shirt. He stood up and looked down at her, glaring with wide-open crazed eyes, as he whispered in a low, menacing voice.

“Listen up… You hear me? Dragons, I can understand. Those guys always start yappin’ at some point—maybe even take the form of a human—so that’s fine. But small to medium-sized animals!? Especially mascot characters that sit on the protag’s head or shoulder!? *ABSOLUTELY FUCKING NOT*. If you’re gonna make it talk, do it from the beginning. Don’t start making it speak fluently when all it’s done to this point is shit out random noises. Making everything more human-like doesn’t make jack better. There’s a big diff between some smart, cute pet character, and a dependable monster companion. So know your place.”

“What long-winded, rapid yapping! I’m surprised you recited all that.”

Masachika and Yuki glared at each other, stepping on each other’s landmines in their exchange.

“O’ dear little sister of mine.”

“What’s up, oh so dear brother?”

“I know I started it, but ain’t this exchange just… completely pointless?”

“I guess?”

After agreeing with a nod, they both let go of each other’s collars and straightened them. With long exhales, they each took a breather and, as if nothing had happened, continued their initial conversation.

“Anyways, setting that aside. I’ve gotta admit, Alya-san and Masha-san are super cute… I mean, haven’t they been gettin’ even more beautiful lately? They almost look out of this world at this point.”

“Huh? Getting more beautiful? For real?”

“You don’t know? There’s been this rumor around school.”

“Eh? I seriously didn’t know.”

No, wait a minute.

After saying that, Masachika paused as he delved back into his memory.

Come to think of it…

Now that he thought about it, he did vaguely recall hearing rumors about Alisa becoming more beautiful. But he had assumed it was because she had become a bit friendlier, started smiling more, and seemed to have a brighter atmosphere overall.

But yeah… Now that I think ’bout it, both Alya and Masha-san have been getting cuter lately, haven’t they?

But that might’ve just been an illusion of his own mind’s making. After all, he became exceedingly conscious of the both of them ever since he became aware of their feelings for him, which probably caused him to feel this way.

“The rumors say it’s ’cause they’ve found themselves a man, or something. Or maybe… they’re in love? That’s what some people were speculating.”

“!”

“Of course, it’s just a tiny fraction of the rumors, but what d’you think ’bout that?”

“Dunno.”

Masachika answered with a trained poker face, but Yuki’s eyes widened in shock, and she slapped the bed with a loud smack.

“Don’t play dumb with me! We’re done joking around here!”

“Then I’ll take the tuna.”[5]

“Who said the catch of the day was sushi toppings!? Woah, that was a perfect comeback!”

“So basically, we’re perfectly in sync, right?”

“Oh, stop it, you’re makin’ me blush.”

“How cute, how cute.”

Masachika responded with a flat tone at the sight of Yuki covering her cheeks with both hands while wiggling bashfully. Yuki then flashed a triumphant grin and stood up abruptly.

“Heh, that goes without sayin’…! So, those two are gettin’ prettier ’cause of the power of love? What a useless buff! No matter how cute Alya-san gets, she’ll never stand up to my carefully calculated cuteness!!”

“Just admitted it’s all calculated, huh?”

“Damn straight, you idiot. I’d be scared shitless if someone was unironically like this!”

“Yet there’s one right in front of me now.”

“Yep, true that… Habits are incredible, y’know? At first, it was definitely all calculated, but before I knew it, this just became who I am…” Yuki confessed, her eyes suddenly growing distant, carrying a hint of melancholy.

Sensing who this whole calculated act was intended for, Masachika softened his expression and slightly wrung out the towel that had been soaked in hot water.

“Anyway, I’ll wipe you down now.”

“Yay~!”

Yuki cheered as she sat down with her back to Masachika. She removed the top of her pajamas, leaving her upper body bare.

With her left arm, she covered her chest and used her right hand to lift her hair, exposing her nape. She then gave him a sidelong glance over her shoulder.

“Oh… what an overwhelming dilemma~”

“If only you just kept your mouth shut…” Masachika said in an exasperated tone.

He then began to wipe Yuki's back with the damp towel, who straightened her back and shivered.

"*Fuhyaa*, *ouhh*."

"What's with the funny noises?"

"Oh my♡. My back's, ngh, so sensitive♡. *Aaahn~*"

"Stop moaning."

"*Ahh~*, can't take it anymore~"

"Don't start actin' like an old man."

"*Funyaa~* It feels so good~~"

"Don't melt now."

"Hey, wait. Could you, um, not touch me?"

"Stop dodging."

"D-damn it, but… it feels… good…!"

"Don't give in now."

"Ah, I think… you're opening my eyes to a new door here—"

"Then don't open it."

"Haha! That was funny."

"Really?"

"You shoulda said, 'Don't find it funny'!"

"Shit, my bad!"

Masachika apologized as Yuki scolded him sharply over her shoulder. Glaring at her brother, Yuki snatched the towel from his hand and began to wipe her left arm.

"As punishment, I'll wipe the front myself."

"That was the plan from the very start, actually."

"Whoops, here's a glance of my armpit☆"

“Don’t need that.”

“By the way, do you have any idea about Alya-san and Masha-san being in love?”

“I told you, I don’t.”

Caught off guard, Masachika feigned ignorance again. Still, he couldn’t hide the fact that he was slightly flustered, all the while Yuki’s gaze honed in on him over her shoulder. His heart skipped a beat.

“Well, it’s fine either way, right?”

“……”

Yuki’s attitude, showing that she clearly saw through everything, rendered Masachika unable to even ask, “What d’you mean?” Instead, he quickly changed the subject.

“Oh right. That reminds me. Speaking of Alya…”

“Hm~?”

“…Hey, don’t just casually take off your pants.”

“Why not? Can’t wipe myself if I don’t,” Yuki said with a straight face.

After taking off her pants, she knelt to wipe her buttocks and thighs, before sitting down to wipe her legs.

“Hey, pass.”

She tossed the used towel over her shoulder to Masachika.

“Isn’t that something the receiving person says?” Masachika retorted as he easily caught the towel that had been thrown unexpectedly at him, dipping it into the basin.

When he looked back, Yuki, who had turned around on the bed, was covering her chest with her arms and smiling mischievously.

“Secret technique: Hide the chest, but not the stomach.”

“What’re you talking about?”

“An innocent, ignorant girl hellbent on hidin’ her chest, that she doesn’t realize her stomach’s exposed, is what really triggers a man’s primal desires.”

“So your ‘ignorance’[6] here’s being blatantly shameless?”

At Masachika’s cold remark, Yuki smacked the bed with both hands in indignation.

“Who’re ya callin’ shameless!?”

“You *are* shameless.”

“You say that, but here you are, sneaking a peak at your own sister’s chest.”

“Shut up and get dressed already.”

"*Alrightyyyy~*"

Yuki responded nonchalantly as she slipped on her slippers and headed toward the closet, wearing only her shorts.

"Have some shame already."

Masachika averted his gaze, offering only a half-hearted reprimand as his sister walked confidently across the room without making an effort to cover herself. Yet, Yuki, not even teasing him at this point, seemed completely unfazed. She casually removed her last piece of clothing and began changing, completely naked.

Seriously, her sense of shame's on the same level as a kindergartener…

While Masachika inwardly grumbled at that, he felt that overreacting now would only make matters worse, so he kept his face turned away and continued the conversation.

"So, about Alya…"

"Hm~? Yeah?"

"…Sorry. I told her we're siblings."

"Oh, really? So, you finally told her."

"Yeah… Figured it was getting harder to keep it a secret."

"Well, that's fine, ain't it? She woulda found out eventually. Better sooner rather than later," Yuki explained in a particularly unconcerned tone.

"…That's all?" Masachika cautiously asked, as if confirming her feelings.

"Hm~? Ah. Well actually, it's kind of a shame I can't tease Alya-san as the hint dropping, formerly associated childhood friend heroine anymore."

"'Formerly associated…' Are you talking about us being a former student council pair? Don't make it sound like we're exes or something; it's confusing. Wait, just stop teasing her in the first place."

“Wait a sec! Can’t I just become the hint dropping, *actual* sister heroine now?”

“I said give it up.”

“Wait, actually, hold that thought. The idea of a pure, brocon sister standing in front of Alya-san to prevent her from stealing you away is also pretty tempting too.”

“Listen already.”

“*Whewww~*♪ The possibilities are endless~♪”

“…As long as you’re enjoying yourself, I guess.”

Having finished changing into her new pajamas, Yuki danced over to the bed and playfully flopped down on it, lying on her back with a broad grin.

“Come to think of it, onii-chan, you’re here ’cause of Alya-san, huh?”

“! W-well, yeah…”

“*Hmm~*. I see, I see~. Welp, as your sister, I’m really happy you’ve found a good partner like that.”

“……”

Masachika, feeling oddly embarrassed at Yuki’s words, turned away without saying anything. Seeing this, Yuki gave him a gentle smile and spoke in a completely sincere tone, free of any pretenses.

“But really, I’m grateful to Alya-san. Thanks to her, you came home, onii-chan.”

To Yuki, those words were genuine and conveyed her pure feelings, with no trace of any ulterior motive. But, for Masachika, the same words pricked at his sense of guilt.

“…I’m sorry… for making you feel lonely all this time.”

“W-whoa, what’s with you all of a sudden?”

Unable to hold it in any longer, Masachika bowed his head deeply. In response, Yuki, with a smile tinged with confusion, sat up and spoke in her usual teasing tone.

“What’s up? Did Granddad say somethin’ to you?”

Seeing the painfully obvious kindness in his sister’s eyes, Masachika let out a sad smile before raising his head and continuing.

“No… it’s got nothing to do with him. I should’ve done this much sooner.”

Then, Masachika once again bowed deeply.

“I’m sorry… for pushing all this burden onto you. I know it’s too late now, but… from now on, I’ll carry that burden instead.”

“U-umm… huh? Sorry, I’m not following. What d’you mean?”

Yuki tilted her head, her confused smile still plastered on her face.

“I’ve asked Granddad to let me return to the Suou family,” Masachika replied with a serious expression.

“…Wha?”

“The burden you’re carrying is something I should be bearing. I can’t keep living this shamelessly anymore. I can’t turn a blind eye to your suffering.”

At Masachika’s straightforward words, Yuki slowly lowered her face.

“Sacrifice? Huh? Are you fucking with me?” she muttered quietly.

Hearing her oddly low tone, Masachika felt a pang of uncertainty.

“Yu—”

“I—!”

Interrupting Masachika’s voice, Yuki shouted.

“I chose to stay here on my own free will! I wanted to do what I could for this family, for our home!”

Standing up on the bed, she glared fiercely at Masachika. Her face was filled with unmistakable rage.

"That hasn't changed, even now! It's been the same all along! And you've been seeing that first hand this entire time! But, onii-chan, you—"

Her voice got caught in her throat for a moment, and she clenched her teeth tightly, before shouting again.

"Did you only see me as some pitiful victim this entire time!?"

Masachika's eyes widened in shock at her outburst. But before he could say anything, Yuki kicked his shoulder with her bare foot.

"Don't give me that shit! Get out! Get *ouuuut!!*" she screamed as she kicked him repeatedly, literally driving him out of the room.

Then, with a furious slam, she shut the door. With her back against the door, she breathed heavily.

"*Haa… haah…* ugh, *cough*, *cough…*"

Her coughing fit returned, likely from overexerting herself, and she grimaced.

"Ugh… i-it hurts…"

In truth, Yuki had been putting on a brave face, playing her usual cheerful *act* right up until just a moment ago. Though her memory of last night was still vague, she had a faint recollection of showing a terribly weakened side of herself to her brother. That was precisely why she'd been forcing herself to act like how she usually did, as if trying to erase that impression.

Even if it's all just an act, or just false cheerfulness… it'll eventually become real, right?

That was how it should be. She had worked hard all this time for that to be the case.

And yet… her brother told her to give it up altogether.

"Don't get all serious on me… damn it," Yuki cursed under her breath as anger welled up inside her once more.

She knew that her brother harbored feelings of guilt toward her.

But she never imagined that he still saw her as some pitiful victim, someone who needed to be protected.

“Ahh~, damn it. It’s all because of this stupid flu.”

Stomping heavily, she made her way back to the bed, but she stopped herself as she suddenly caught a glimpse of herself in the full-length mirror.

…No, it’s not because of that, right?

Reflected in the mirror was a small, thin, frail-looking body.

A body that still couldn’t shake off the impression of bedridden days from the past, and the position of being the younger sister.

These were the two main reasons why Masachika perceived that she was someone he needed to protect.

Why… do I have to be onii-chan’s little sister?

If only… she’d been born as his older sister.

If only she’d been born just a year earlier, Yuki wouldn’t have been automatically assigned as someone Masachika had to protect by default.

If Yuki had been the elder sibling instead, Masachika wouldn’t have felt so indebted, and he wouldn’t have worried himself to the point of denying his own existence.

What a pointless “if.”

Pulling her gaze away from the mirror, Yuki staggered toward the bed and flopped down, face-first. She lay there for a while, facedown, when suddenly a knock rang out on the door, followed by Ayano’s voice.

“Yuki-sama? May I come in?”

“……”

When Yuki didn’t respond, Ayano seemed to assume she was asleep. Calling out a soft, “Pardon me,” she quietly entered the room.

Seeing Yuki lying face down without a blanket, she approached to cover her up with it —

“Yuki-sama? Are you awake?”

Noticing Yuki’s open eyes glaring at the mattress, Ayano hesitated, her hands wavering mid-air.

“Uhh, what… happened? I just happened to pass by Masachika-sama, and he seemed rather dazed, but…”

Hearing his name from Ayano’s lips made Yuki feel irritated once more. She pushed herself up from the bed with both hands, gazing fiercely into the air.

“Ayano.”

“Y-yes, what is it, Yuki-sama?”

“We’re gonna win next year’s election. No matter what.”

“Eh, ah, yes. Understood.”

Still unsure about why Yuki would suddenly say such a thing, Ayano nodded, looking a bit confused. Without even glancing her way, Yuki clenched her teeth tightly and whispered.

“I’ll win… and make them realize. That I’m no longer weak or pitiful.”

Then, she directed her declaration toward her absent brother.

“I’ll deliver the final blow, onii-chan.”

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[1]: 5M refers to Mukuchi (無口), meaning someone who's silent and speaks very little; Muhyujou (無表情), someone who often has a blank expression and rarely shows emotion; Muon (無音), a person who is very soft spoken; Masochist (M), someone who gains pleasure from humiliation or pain; and Maid, self explanatory. Here, Masachika talks about adding Mai Pēsu (マイペース), which literally means "my own pace" (I mean look at the pronunciation lol) and is used to describe someone who is vehement of completing tasks at their own efficient speed/manner without suspecting to external pressures.

[2]: Hachishakusama (八尺様), literally meaning eight feet, is a creepy looking, 8 feet tall female yokai that repeatedly utters "Po" (ぽ), which is what Ayano says here.

[3]: This whole section is a reference to Neon Genesis Evangelion. First, the Spear of Longinus is a weapon from the anime, and is considered to have god-like powers. Longinus is also the name given to the unknown Roman soldier that pierced Jesus Christ with his spear, hence why Yuki mentions that it was used in her dream to execute Christians.

Second, Yuki saying she knows her room's ceiling is a dig at "Unfamiliar ceiling," a quote from Episode 2 of Neon Genesis Evangelion (Unfamiliar Ceiling). It is uttered by Shinji when he wakes up in an unfamiliar hospital.

[4]: This whole exchange is a reference to Exodia the Forbidden One from the Yu-Gi-Oh! franchise. For context, Exodia is also known as the Demon God of the Palace and the "Sealed One" (封印されし) in Japanese.

The basic surface level information you need to know is Exodia is powerful as fuck, so this Grand Vizier guy sealed it into like 5 different slabs/cards.

So this passage starts with Masachika telling Yuki to not overdo it as she's "still sealed," hence comparing her to Exodia, whose powers are sealed. Aka, she's only just recovered (and thus isn't back to full health). Yuki then attempts to play along with the reference by asking who he's calling a Demon King. As mentioned above, Exodia is often referred to as the "**Demon God** of the Palace," so she gets the reference slightly wrong, which prompts Masachika to correct her with his next dialogue line.

[5]: The pun here is that "joke" (ネタ) in Japanese can also mean nigiri sushi toppings (tuna, salmon, tamago, etc...).

[6]: Masachika uses "むち" (muchi) here, which can be used as onomatopoeia to refer to something fleshy or plump. It sounds a lot like "無知" (muchi) which means ignorance, hence a pun. The joke is that Masachika uses "むち" refer to Yuki's supposed ignorance, while simultaneously playing on the double meaning by making a comment on the situation of an ignorant girl's lack of awareness and her misplaced focused on covering her chest, without realizing the primal instincts that may be triggered from her exposed stomach.

Chapter 6 - And Alisa Moved Along Safely

After being kicked out of Yuki's room, Masachika followed Kyotarou home in his car. Ever since Yuki's violent outburst, he'd been in a complete daze, almost completely absent-minded. He didn't even attempt any of the chores he normally did, nor did he try to study or surf the internet. All he did was simply stare as the day turned to dusk and the sun set, only pausing at his father's call to the dinner table.

"How is it? I think it turned out pretty good…"

"…Yeah, it's delicious."

Masachika responded absent-mindedly as he slowly brought a bite to his mouth, eating the dinner that Kyotarou confidently claimed to be a faithful recreation of the food in a certain famous restaurant in England.

Still, Yuki's words continued to swirl around endlessly in his mind. The issues that used to occupy his thoughts until now—the ultimatum set by Gensei—had completely vaporized; they were replaced completely by the memory of his little sister's rage. It was the first time Yuki had ever directed an emotion even vaguely resembling anger at him, and the shock of her outburst was too overwhelming for Masachika.

For Yuki to get angry like that… she must've felt so insulted. I guess I pushed her way too hard… She was even crying so much yesterday… But still, there's no denying I've been sacrificing her well-being this whole time…

He understood that his words and guilt had hurt Yuki's pride. After all, she'd been dutifully fulfilling her role as the heir to the Suou family this whole time. For her brother to suddenly turn up and say something like, "You've done well 'til now. Leave the rest to your older brother," it was only natural she'd respond in pure puzzlement and shock. Reflecting on it now, it made perfect sense.

Still, he couldn't grasp exactly why she was this angry—to the point of physically kicking him out of the room in a fit of rage no less. Masachika even believed she'd actually be happy at the prospect of living together again.

I mean, I guess I must've done something *wrong if she got that pissed… But still, I really thought it through and gave it my all…*

Once again, Masachika sunk deeper into the cesspit of self-reproach and repulsion. Observing his son's obviously distracted state, Kyotarou smiled gently.

"What happened? Did you fight with Yuki or something?" he asked.

"!"

Masachika's eyebrows twitched in response, and Kyotarou, seeing that he'd hit the nail on the head, nodded with a smile on his face.

"That so…? Well, it's not really *all* that bad. Instead of sweepin' everything under the rug and pretending to get along fine, sometimes it's better to let it all out and have a fight or two. A cathartic moment here and there can actually help a relationship."

"…Really? Wouldn't it be better if we could just avoid fighting in the first place?"

Masachika replied skeptically, and Kyotarou responded calmly, without even the slightest hint of a reprimanding tone.

"It's normal for two people with strong feelings for each other to get into fierce arguments over even the most trivial things. Even if those feelings are of strong affection."

"…Is that really how it works?"

"Absolutely. Y'know, they say the opposite of love is indifference, amirite? And you don't fight with someone you're indifferent to. The most peaceful people in this world are those who're probably indifferent and disconnected from everything and everyone around them."

"I mean, I guess…" Masachika conceded as he listened, chewing over his father's words.

“Right? So, if you think about it like that, even a sibling quarrel can be seen as a form of affection, don’t you think?”

“No, that’s kinda a stretch,” Masachika retorted.

But still, he couldn’t help but smirk slightly at his father’s words, who shrugged playfully.

“Eh, maybe it’s not… I mean, they do say the more you fight, the closer you are…”

“Exactly, exactly. What’s certain is that Yuki cares as deeply for you as you do for her.”

Masachika widened his eyes at those words, clearly caught off guard, all the while Kyotarou looked at his son with a gentle expression.

“So, everything will be fine,” he reassured him gently.

★·☆·★

Early the next morning.

Alisa, who’d left home more than an hour earlier than usual, found herself standing at the entrance of the apartment building where Masachika lived.

…It’s fine. This is normal. That’s right, I’m just curious about what happened after I left at Yuki-san’s place, that’s all.

Making those excuses to herself, Alisa fidgeted with the compact mirror Nonoa had given as a birthday gift, nervously adjusting her bangs. She might’ve continued doing that for five, or even ten, minutes if left alone, but she caught sight of someone looking at her in puzzlement from the entrance—probably some resident of the building.

Hastily closing the compact mirror, she tried to act nonchalant as she tucked it into her bag, before stepping in front of the intercom. After taking a few deep breaths, she pressed the button for Masachika’s apartment.

Her heart pounded heavily in anticipation as the dial tone rang five times, before finally making an audible click, signifying the call had connected.

"...Alya? Mornin'. What's up?"

"Good morning, Masachika-kun. Sorry for showing up so suddenly like this. I was curious about what happened after the other day, and I thought it might be a little difficult to talk about it at school. So, if it's alright with you, could we talk about it while walking to school together?"

Alisa smoothly delivered the lines she had mentally recited priorly with a composed expression, silently celebrating the fact that she hadn't stumbled over her words as she waited for Masachika's response.

"Ah, yeah sure, but... I was just gonna have breakfast. That okay?"

"Oh, is that so? I don't mind, I'll wait."

"Ah, alright... Come in then."

With that, the door opened, and Alisa mentally pumped her fist again in triumph.

While waiting for the elevator, she took out her compact mirror again and adjusted her hair again for the umpteenth time this morning. After all, what she'd told Masachika just now was only half of the truth. The other half being... that she simply just wanted to try going to school with him.

Walking to school together... side by side... That'll make us look really close, right?

Feeling as though she were on cloud nine, Alisa swayed her body side to side, desperately trying to keep her lips from curling into a grin. Her thoughts had become unusually girlish, and there was a clear reason for it. It all started when she found out that Yuki was *just* Masachika's sister.

Now, it was true that just two days ago, she'd realized that Yuki was a special and important person to him. And in that sense, Alisa had come to terms with the fact that she'd never measure up to Yuki, her emotions spiraling into a pit of dejection at the time. But after returning home and getting a good night's sleep, an entirely different voice began to echo in her mind. Namely…

But they're just *siblings in the end. Yuki-san isn't a love rival, so it's actually fine, isn't it? If anything, with one less rival around, the race for his love is solely mine to run—isn't that perfect? I should just start dancing now!*

It was this voice.

Alisa, who'd been actively trying to suppress her own romantic feelings up until recently, was *mistakenly* convinced that Masachika and Yuki secretly harbored feelings for each other. She had *mistook* their situation for a tragedy; one where they'd never be allowed to get together. So, coming to this newfound realization was sufficient enough to shatter the seal she'd place over her emotions. And it made her feel like dancing—alone in her room.

However…

On the other hand, the fact still remained that the majority of the space in Masachika's heart was not occupied by Alisa, but by Yuki. When she thought about it this way, her mood inevitably sank again. Visualizing Masachika's kind eyes, and his gentle hands, directed toward Yuki and not herself, her chest tightened, and her sudden urge to dance vanished.

Why is she dancing in the first place? Is she stupid? Masachika's heart was undoubtedly directed toward Yuki, even if it was just *purely* platonic. At least for now, there was no chance it would turn toward Alisa…

But it's just *sibling love—familial love, right? It's totally* different *from romantic love, amirite? When it comes to something like that, Masachika-kun's number one… unless I'm mistaken, is me, isn't it?*

Eh, should I start dancing again? Should I!? Yaaay, it's party time♪

…And so, for the entirety of yesterday, Alisa's heart rocked back and forth between love-stricken highs and lows, her emotions fluctuating like a sine wave. And as a result, Alisa felt a bit high right now. The romantic feelings that'd been locked away in the depths of her heart seemed to transform into countless mini-Alyas that paraded while shouting, "Yay, freedom~☆"

What's more, it sounded like he just woke up, right? I bet I'm the only other girl who's ever gone up to Masachika-kun's place at this hour. In other words, that makes me a special person… Fufu♪

This was her state of mind. Incidentally, it appeared that Ayano, who might've served as a precedent, had been run over and forgotten by the parade.

With a lightness in her step that seemed to be accompanied by an imaginary "la-la-la♪" sound effect—which was hardly befitting of her title as the cold, lone princess—Alisa stepped into the elevator. Checking her reflection once more in the compact mirror in front of her, she then, with complete confidence, took out something from her bag.

Yep—it was the white gloves that Masachika had given her on her birthday the other day. To be honest, with the sun already out, she didn't really have any good reason to wear them yet. But, what mattered was wearing Masachika's gift immediately. More specifically, him seeing that was incredibly important.

Alright, with this, I'm fully equipped. With a firm resolve as she recycled the buoyant feeling in her chest into a determined smile, Alisa rang the doorbell to Masachika's apartment—

"Yes~? Ah, hello, nice to meet you."

Father joins the battle☆!

The expression on Alisa's face dropped like a stone. The parade of mini-Alyas marching proudly inside her heart came to an abrupt halt, as they all held blank, bewildered faces.

"Eh, ah—"

Suspecting she had the wrong apartment, she quickly checked the apartment number and nameplate.

But no, it was correct.

“??”

As Alisa instantly fell into the depths of confusion, Kyotarou, who’d opened the front door, gave a slightly awkward smile and bowed politely.

“I’m Masachika’s father, Kyotarou.”

“Ah, o-oh! I’m sorry! Uh, I’m Alisa Mikhailovna Kujou! I’m always in Masa—Kuze-kun’s care… Uh, I mean, sorry for showing up so early in the morning!” Alisa said as she bowed her head abruptly.

She hurriedly removed her gloves and stuffed them into her bag. Yes, she totally wasn’t wearing anything like that today. No one saw it. Let’s just go with that.

“Well, um, today, I, uh—”

Raising her head, she attempted to explain the situation with words, but they refused to come together in any coherent manner. It was clear how flustered Alisa was, and Kyotarou, cognizant of this, gave her a reassuring smile as he stepped aside.

“It’s alright. Please, come in.”

“Ah, sorry for disturbing. Pardon my intrusion…”

Shrinking her shoulders in embarrassment, Alisa bowed repeatedly as she entered the house. Yet, inside her mind, a storm of confusion continued to rage.

Why!? Why’s his dad here! Whyyy!?

Faced with the unexpected and abrupt special event of “greeting your crush’s father,” her mind went completely blank. The parade inside of her heart had begun retreating, with the lead mini-Alya screaming, “Retreat! RETREAT!!!” as the crowd of mini-Alyas dispersed in a flurry of panic. The sense of elation she once felt a moment prior deflated with a hiss.

And it was also then did Alisa suddenly realize…

Wait a sec… Isn’t this a terrible first impression!?

She then analyzed herself calmly and objectively.

From Masachika's perspective, Alisa showing up suddenly in the morning might settle as the actions of a "worrywart partner." But how about Kyotarou, who was meeting her for the first time now?

A female classmate brazenly trying to enter the house where his son usually lives alone early in the morning…?

The implication was obvious. Anyone would see her as an indecent slut who lacked common sense and dignity—someone who had no problem with barging into a boy's house at the crack of dawn.

That's not true at allllll!

As she slipped her feet into the slippers Kyotarou had kindly prepared for her, Alisa desperately suppressed the urge to pull at her hair in frustration.

It's wrong! Wroooong! I've never been to a boy's house other than Masachika's, and even then, it's still the first time I've come this early in the morning! I have no weird intentions at all, I swear! Sure, I might've thought a bit about how nice it'd be to walk to school hand in hand, or how he'd react if I suddenly clung to his arm as a way to cheer him up, but that's only 'cause it's Masachika! I'm not a slut at all!! Gaaaaah!!!

For Alisa, an extreme perfectionist when it came to interacting with the opposite sex, to the point that Masachika often called her overly fastidious, the idea of her crush's father doubting her chastity was so upsetting that it almost made her scream out loud. Still, shouting about her innocence here would just be adding fuel to the fire that had already been set on her dignity. Besides, the more you try to explain yourself out of a situation like this, the more suspicious it'll only get. Denying it too vehemently here might even inadvertently reveal the feelings she harbored for Masachika. Therefore…

"Please, take a seat. Masachika's just changing and should be out soon," Kyotarou told her.

"Yes, thank you."

No matter how frustrated she felt, she had no choice but to stay silent.

Clenching her teeth, her fingers fidgeting restlessly, Alisa sat down in the living room chair Kyotarou gestured to. Not long after, Masachika appeared, dressed in his white school uniform and slacks.

Ah, I love him.

Such a thought surfaced in her mind instantly. The mini-Alyas, who'd scattered earlier, suddenly returned out of thin air, cheering and squealing inside her chest.

He still looks a little sleepy. Ah, he's still got a bit of bedhead at the back. His hair's sticking up, so cute♡

As these thoughts floated around in her mind, she noticed Kyotarou in the corner of her vision and hurriedly chased away the mini-Alyas in her heart. Putting on her usual composed expression, she tried to speak to Masachika as she usually did.

"Good morning, Masachika-kun. You look sleepy again today."

But the moment she finished saying that, it occurred to her how it was something she should only say in the classroom, not after showing up at his house so early in the morning. What's more, she casually called him by his first name right in front of his father.

I messed uuuup~~~! I messed up straight from the get-goooo~~~! Aaaaaah~~~!!

Alisa internally held her head in her hands, but there was no taking back the words that had already been said. As she struggled to maintain her composed face, Masachika replied without seeming to care all that much.

"Yeah, mornin'... I guess I'm actually pretty sleepy, yeah. *Yawn*..."

Stifling a yawn, Masachika sat down next to Alisa. Just then, Kyotarou came over with a tray and placed two cups in front of both of them.

"Here you go. You're fine with cocoa, right?"

"Oh, I actually prefer it. Thank you very much."

“You’re welcome. By the way, did you have breakfast, Kujou-san?”

“U-uhh…”

Caught off guard by the sudden question, Alisa hesitated, her eyes darting around.

The truth was, Alisa hadn’t eaten breakfast yet. The reason? She simply couldn’t think of a good excuse to leave the house so early.

It was far too early to say that she had class duty today, and claiming it was for student council work wouldn’t have worked either since her sister, who was also on the student council, would’ve known otherwise. As a result, Alisa simply left a note that said, “Heading out a bit early,” and slipped out of the house before her family even woke up. On her way, she had stopped by a convenience store to buy a sandwich, planning to eat it at some point.

What do I do? Should I tell Masachika-kun’s father that I came here without my parents’ permission—is that okay? Maybe I should keep that part to myself? Or maybe… I can just lie and say I already ate… But I already hesitated, so that’s impossible, right? No, actually, hmm?

The unexpected situation and her regrettable blunder caused her brain to short circuit. She could tell her thoughts were spinning uselessly in circles. In the midst of this, Kyotarou tilted his head with a gentle smile, seemingly noticing this.

“If you haven’t eaten, would you like to join us? It’s just leftovers from yesterday, but…”

“……”

To be honest, that was a pretty—no, a very tempting offer. Ever since a moment ago, Alisa had noticed the wonderful smell of curry in the air. She had vaguely suspected it, but Kyotarou mentioning “leftovers” basically confirmed it. The Kuze family’s breakfast this morning was homemade curry that had been left to rest overnight.

I’m not really in the mood for a sandwich anymore after smelling this…

The aroma of curry, powerfully stimulating her empty stomach, tugged at Alisa's heartstrings. However, she wasn't bold enough to say, "Then, if you insist," and accept.

"Thank you, but there's no need to worry. I did eat something light before coming."

She quickly replied and nodded inwardly at her clever lie. She hadn't really eaten breakfast, but she had eaten a *little bit*. That way, her hesitation earlier wouldn't have been strange. Moreover, it also gave the impression that she didn't come straight here without her parents' permission. Yes, it was indeed a clever lie… Alisa congratulated herself, but Kyotarou, a parent, wasn't going to let it go so easily.

"Just something light? That's no good. Young people like you guys need to eat properly in the morning."

"Ah, no, really, there's no need to worry…"

"Don't be shy. We're about to eat too. Plus, I'd feel bad making you wait while we eat. Besides, the more the merrier, amirite? Feel free to eat as much as you can, okay?"

"Ah, umm…"

Having claimed to have eaten lightly already, it was too late to say that she had a sandwich now. Paired with the overwhelming smell of curry in the air, Alisa found her self-control wavering.

"Then… okay."

Before she realized it, she was nodding her head. Kyotarou smiled, looking satisfied.

"It's okay, it's curry. Just take as much as you'd like; you can eat quickly if you want, too," he said. "Oh, you don't mind curry in the morning, do you?"

I knew it was curry after all.

Alisa nodded inwardly at his question.

"It's fine. I like curry."

"That's good to hear. Oh, by the way—"

With that, Kyotarou asked in a casual tone.

“Are you okay with spicy food?”

For a moment, she felt a terrible premonition—an instinct so strong it set off her survival instincts.

Ah, I sense it. It’s kinda distant, but… I can feel it.

Ever since the day she ate super spicy ramen with Masachika and Yuki, Alisa had been regularly challenging herself with spicy foods to build her tolerance. Because of this, she developed some sorta sixth sense for detecting the presence of such dishes. The kind of dishes that, if she let her guard down, would knock her out unconscious with a single blow and even try to take her soul away. She could see it now; the grim reaper, holding a bright red scythe while wearing a necklace adorned with countless habaneros.

Crap… From past experiences, sensing it from this far away means it’s truly dangerous…

But no matter how much her instincts warned her, Alisa’s answer was already decided, given Masachika’s presence. Why had she been increasing her tolerance for spiciness all this time? It went without saying—it was for this very moment!

“…I’m fine. I like spicy food.”

Clenching her hands tightly in her lap, Alisa smiled bravely, ready to face whatever lay ahead. Kyotarou, seeing her response, smiled in relief.

“I see. This one turned out a bit spicy, but if you’re good with that, great.”

At Kyotarou’s use of the word “a bit,” Alisa felt a wave of relief. Just to be sure, she casually probed further.

“Are you also fond of spicy foods like Masachika-kun is, Masachika-kun’s father?”

“Hm? No, not particularly…”

“Oh, is that so?”

Receiving such a confirmation, Alisa was finally allowed to feel at ease. And who would blame her? There was no way for Alisa, someone who's meeting Kyotarou for the first time, to know that, rather than not being a fan of spicy foods, he barely had a sense of taste.

In fact, Kyotarou's preferences slightly differed from most. His tolerance for sweetness, saltiness, sourness, and even bitterness, was far higher than the average person. He could easily eat incredibly sweet desserts that would make even those with a sweet tooth grimace after a single bite, or extremely bitter teas that even the best food trends challengers would spit out.

This also held true for spiciness and pungent smells. It wasn't abnormal to see Kyotarou eat a super spicy or extremely smelly dish with only a simple, "Wow, that's something," and without much hesitation. This broad tolerance of diverse flavors became a crucial asset in his role as a diplomat, as it allowed him to eat any local cuisine like a champ. But that aside…

His unrefined palate had, at this moment, inadvertently become a dangerous trap for Alisa.

Looks like that feeling earlier was just my imagination… Maybe I'm just overreacting. I mean, it makes sense. If it really was that *spicy, Masachika-kun would've warned me by now; like last time.*

Watching Masachika silently sip his cocoa, Alisa followed suit, taking a sip of her own, all the while her wariness faded.

Unfortunately, Masachika's silence was a result of still being distracted by what had happened yesterday—he was not fully present. On top of that, he was groggy from being sleep deprived and was still in the process of waking up, so his mind wasn't firing on all cylinders. He didn't even realize that his father had just offered Alisa some curry.

"Well then, come over here and serve yourself as much rice and curry as you'd like, alright?"

"Thank you. I'll have just a little, then…"

"Masachika, you too."

"Hm? *Yeaaah*."

And so, without a hint of caution, Alisa stepped into the kitchen.

Ah, it does really smell good now that I'm closer. It just has kinda a unique scent… Maybe it's like a more authentic curry made with a lot of different spices?

Drawn in by the appetizing aroma, Alisa followed Kyotarou's invitation. But still, having remembered her claim of having already "ate something light," she restrained herself and scooped just enough rice to fill half of her bowl.

But as she opened the lid of the curry pot, a wave of steam and its scent rose up, forcing her to squint her eyes.

Wha—?

She felt the presence of the grim reaper again. And this time, she was sure it wasn't just her imagination. He was definitely now closer than before. She could feel his gaze fixed on her from behind, just outside of striking range.

Eh, no way. It smells so good… and from what I can see, it doesn't look that red, right?

Inside the pot was a curry that had a slightly dark, thick consistency to it. She couldn't see any obviously suspicious ingredients that would cause trouble. Maybe… could it be that everything dangerous had already been completely dissolved into it?

"!!"

A chill ran her down her spine, but it was already too late to turn back—she'd already scooped her rice. Behind her, Masachika, who'd also taken a serving of his own, placed down the rice paddle with a small clatter. There was no more time to hesitate.

I'll just… take the smallest amount of curry possible without looking strange…

With slow and careful movements, Alisa titled the ladle, pouring the curry onto her plate.

Maybe… this much?

Stopping when the ratio of rice to curry was around five to three, she quickly retreated, pretending as if nothing was wrong.

Alright! I've managed to secure more rice! This should be fine!

Feeling satisfied, she waited for Masachika and Kyotarou to come back. Masachika returned first, and a few seconds later, Kyotarou followed, carrying their curry plates. But then—

"Oh, hold on a sec," Kyotarou suddenly said.

He placed his plate on the table before immediately turning back to the kitchen… only to return with the pot in hand.

Hm?

As a wave of unease washed over Alisa, Kyotarou spoke with a smile.

"There's just a li'l bit left in the pot, so how 'bout both of you have a bit more?"

He then glanced at Alisa's plate and made a face of mild surprise.

Crap, he noticed!

"That's not much, Kujou-san. You don't need to hold back."

"Ah, this much is fine for me—"

As Alisa tried to politely decline, Kyotarou, undeterred, scooped the last bit of curry from the pot onto Alisa's plate and then onto Masachika's.

Ah…!

As a result, what remained in front of her was a ratio of rice to curry of about three to four. In the end, all sneakily trying to take as little curry as possible did was leave her with even more. If she'd just gone with a one-to-one ratio from the get go, Kyotarou might have taken care of the rest himself.

He's getting closer… even closer than before…

She could feel the presence of the grim reaper just a few meters behind her. But knowing this now didn't matter—there was no turning back. All she could do now was brace herself and face the music head-on.

I-it's okay… As long as I'm prepared for it, it shouldn't knock me out in one go… And if worse comes to worst, there's always the cocoa.

Kyotarou had prepared some water, but anyone who'd gone against intense spiciness would know that water would have little effect. The half-full cup of cocoa in front of her was her most certain and precious recovery item. She regretted having drunk half of it before the meal.

It'll be fine! This amount of curry's still only half a normal serving! That should be doable!!

Bolstering herself with some sorta flawed logic that seemed reasonable but really wasn't, Alisa mentally steeled herself. She clasped her hands together.

"""Itadakimasu."""

Before then finally scooping up a spoonful of curry and rice and, in one swift motion, stuffing it into her mouth. Almost immediately, the taste of the sweet and mildly spicy roux spread throughout her mouth.

Huh? It's not spicy? It's actually mild and delicious…?

An unexpected taste. She could sense the grim reaper, who had been lurking behind her, turn his back and move away.

Ah, thank god. Guess I was just too paranoid. Look, even the grim reaper is—

But just as she thought that, it returned with a running start!

Eh, wha—?

From behind the sweetness came a blazing fire that surged forth. In the brief moment where Alisa had let her guard down, she felt the grim reaper poise his scythe for a swift and powerful strike against her neck!

"—!!"

In an instant, Alisa's consciousness was nearly snatched away, but she managed to hold on.

Hngh—!

She somehow endured it. After all, she was in front of Masachika, her crush, and his father, Kyotarou. That fact alone was enough to keep Alisa's consciousness tethered—just barely. Yet, this was still an incredibly unfortunate turn of events for her.

O-owww! It huuuurts! S-so spicyyyy!!!

Her brain was filled with nothing but that single sensation—a flood of signals conveying nothing else.

Even after surviving the initial shock, the situation didn't improve at all. Like a lingering poison, the damage continued to accumulate steadily.

I-I cant anymore... I need to retreat to the rice...!!!

Driven by the unbearable pain, Alisa instinctively reached toward the plain white rice—but abruptly stopped herself.

You idiot! How can you waste your precious rice this early in the game! It's okay, calm down... Hic, *the spiciness will eventually subside!* Hic! *I just have to endure this for now!*

Having gone through several ordeals before at this point, Alisa had learned a thing or two on how to handle ultra-spicy foods. She learned that, instead of fleeing to rice too soon, focusing all her attention on discerning the taste of the ingredients was more effective.

Doing so now, she did indeed taste the umami from the meat and the sweetness of the vegetables and rice beneath the intense heat.

But they're still so distant! The area before that was practically an absolute volcanic zone! Because of this, the beef, the vegetables, and rice were nowhere near approaching her!

"Ugh, ngh—"

Though she somehow managed to swallow what was in her mouth, the lingering heat that remained was still enough to make her tongue burn in agony. Unable to bear it anymore, she reached for the cocoa, taking a huge gulp. Yet, it did nothing to extinguish the fire.

Desperately, she tried to overwhelm the spiciness with sheer volume, tipping the cup back all the way… And by the time she felt the heat subside by *just* a bit, the cup was already empty.

Ah—you stupid idiot, what are you doing! Why did I drink all the precious cocoa after one bite!? How am I supposed to get through this now!?

There was no use crying over spilt milk; no matter how much she cursed herself. All that remained of her safe zone was a bit of white rice, which looked woefully inadequate compared to the amount of curry left.

T-this is… i-imposible.

Even though what was on her plate was practically only half a serving, the fact that one spoonful had caused so much suffering served as a bad premonition for what was to come. She could only envision a future where she'd collapse halfway through, her soul taken by the grim reaper. She could sense him hovering right behind her, as if waiting impatiently with a snarky, "Ready yet?"

"Kujou-san, um… could it be that it doesn't suit your taste?" Kyotarou suddenly asked.

"!"

His tone caught Alisa's attention from across the table as she raised her head with a start. Her eyes met Kyotarou's, who, behind his glasses, wore a gaze full of concern.

“I tried to recreate this curry dish that’s known to be quite spicy even in England… But maybe it’s too much? Please don’t force yourself if you can’t eat it…”

Despite hearing such words, there was no way Alisa could bring herself to say, “Well, if you insist,” and put her spoon down.

“No, it’s fine. It’s delicious,” she instead answered with a determined smile.

After all, there was still the possibility of Kyotarou misunderstanding her as some slut who brazenly barged into a boy’s house without a care in the world in the morning. On top of that, she couldn’t afford to be seen as a rude girl who would just leave after simply taking one bite of the dish that he’d gone out of his way to serve her. Especially where he might very well be her future father-in-law—

Wait, what am I even thinking!? Shoo! Shoo, get outta here!

Chasing away the mini-Alyas that popped up in her heart again as she let her guard down, Alisa stubbornly maintained her smile.

In reality, however, Kyotarou didn’t think of Alisa as a shameless slut at all. He’d already heard so much about her from both Masachika and Yuki before. And just two days ago, Masachika had told him that it was *her* who’d given him the courage to visit the Suou manor in the first place. Therefore, he understood that her visit today was purely out of concern for Masachika. Yes, he really was actually thinking, “She’s even nicer than I’d heard~” at this very moment.

As for Alisa’s feelings toward Masachika, Kyotarou was completely oblivious. Just like his taste buds, he was quite dull in that department as well.

“You sure? You really don’t have to push yourself.”

“Thank you. But really, it’s fine.”

To prove her point, Alisa scooped another spoonful of curry into her mouth. Again, she was hit with a satisfying sense of sweetness at first… and then came the inferno! Once again, an overwhelming sense of heat raged through her mouth! A one-two combo from the grim reaper himself!!!

A-are these two seriously okay with eating this!?

While desperately trying to maintain a poker face, Alisa glanced over at Kyotarou across from her and Masachika beside her.

"Yep, I knew letting it sit overnight would've deepened the flavor. You think so too, right, Masachika?"

"Huh? Ah… I guess."

"Geez, Masachika. Still half-asleep? Did you sleep much last night?"

"*Hmm?* Oh, well…"

They're… eating it normally…

Kyotarou was savoring each bite with genuine enjoyment, while Masachika, albeit looking somewhat dazed, continued eating steadily. Alisa couldn't help but feel that the two seemed like a different species to her, and it sent shivers down her spine.

I mean, look! How's Masachika-kun eating this ridiculously spicy curry while half-asleep!? Have his nerves gone numb or something!?

Thinking about her partner like that, who seemed to have transcended the realm of simply liking spicy food, Alisa couldn't help but cast a look as if she were staring at some kinda pervert. Immediately shaking her head, she dropped her gaze back to her own plate and began strategizing.

There's a limit to how much rice can help… But still, this curry has that initial impression of sweetness the moment you taste it.

If that's the case, then there was no choice but to seize that window of opportunity and race through it. To survive, she had to make a quick escape from the grim reaper, who even now, was muttering still behind her.

"Oh my, this one's tougher than I thought," he said menacingly while relentlessly scraping her neck with his scythe!

N-nooooow!!!

Cheering herself on inwardly, Alisa thrust her spoon into the curry before bringing it swiftly to her mouth. As she'd predicted, its initial sweetness remained, so she took another bite, and then another, all before that sweetness would inevitably disappear.

She couldn't stop now. She's just gotta push forward with sheer momentum! The goal's just ahead!

But…

Ah… No way…

Just then, the grim reaper decided to call for reinforcements—there were two of them now. With a synchronized, "heave, ho~!" their scythes crossed from both sides, gouging at her.

Oh, come on… Not like this…

Feeling her consciousness being slowly but surely robbed away, Alisa, out of sheer stubbornness, managed to shovel the last bite into her mouth. In the end, she somehow barely managed to finish the meal, but what slipped from her lips was neither a cheer of accomplishment nor a spirited "Thanks for the meal."

【I'm going to die…】

Rather, it was a faint lament in Russian, as if her soul had slipped away.

★·☆·★

Alya? Uhh… you okay?"

"……"

While walking together toward the elevator after leaving the Kuze family apartment, Masachika called out to Alisa.

Yesterday, all Masachika could think about was Yuki, even after getting into bed. Before he knew it, he'd drifted off to sleep at some point without even knowing when he fell asleep, or how long he'd slept for that matter. He woke up and ate his breakfast in a daze, only to be snapped back to consciousness as he heard a pitiful-sounding cry in Russian from next to him.

When he quickly looked to his right, he saw a deathly expression he was all too familiar with. It was only then did he realize that what Alisa had just finished eating was the ultra-spicy curry that Kyotarou had made the day before. In a fit of panic, he quickly ran to grab some milk for her, but ever since then… Alisa had been in a total state of silence. She looked exhausted… or rather, it seemed that her spirit had practically been reaped at this point, as she was left with only a vacant husk of an expression on her face.

Geez. I know I'm partly to blame since I was completely out of it, but Dad, seriously… Why'd you even give her something so insanely spicy in the first place…

Knowing he was just venting at this point, Masachika muttered his complaints to his father in his heart.

"No, I'm really sorry! Truly sorry! I guess she was just trying to be polite because of me…"

Ever since Alisa had practically passed out after finishing her meal, Kyotarou had been apologizing nonstop.

From the start, Masachika's father had really thought that the curry was *just* mildly spicy. He probably didn't have any malicious intent whatsoever, and Masachika knew that well. He's experienced it on multiple occasions after all, given how his father always brought back peculiar dishes and bizarre treats for him to try.

Still, he thought his father should've been at least more aware of how different his taste buds were from the average person and perhaps exercise a bit more caution.

No, maybe… it's because he's so different that… he's unconsciously searching for someone who'll eat the same things and share the same reaction?

As he mulled over that thought, the elevator arrived at their floor. Masachika and Alisa stepped in together, and he put on a mask as a precaution given he'd been in contact with Yuki; someone who was down with the flu. Descending to the first floor, they exited through the entrance and began walking to school. It was only then that Alisa spoke up.

"...Do you always eat stuff like that, Masachika-kun?"

"Hm? No, not really... I mean, you've seen me bring my lunchbox sometimes, right? It's usually pretty normal. Yesterday was... I mean, I guess it was my dad just getting a li'l too enthusiastic.

"Ah, I see..."

"Sorry, okay? Dad's taste is just a bit off compared to others... He really didn't mean any harm."

"*Hmm*, it's fine. It's just that my training wasn't enough..."

"Training? What're you talking about..."

Hearing Alisa say something that sounded a lot like what Ayano would say, Masachika figured she was just pretty traumatized.

Then, he thought back to why she was here in the first place.

"Good morning, Masachika-kun. Sorry for showing up so suddenly like this. I was curious about what happened after the other day, and I thought it might be a little difficult to talk about it at school. So, if it's alright with you, could we talk while walking to school together?"

Ah... right~. That's why she's here.

Recalling that Alisa had come to ask about what happened after she left the Suou manor the other day, Masachika began to consider how much he should tell her. Deciding to keep the details about his past with his mother vague, while focusing primarily on his discussion with Gensei, he started talking.

"Ah~. Alya, about what happened at the Suou manor over the past two days..."

"!"

Hearing Masachika's words, Alisa straightened her posture, looking alert. Seeing that and thinking she seemed ready to listen properly, Masachika began to explain.

He told her about how he'd reconciled with his estranged mother, and how he had negotiated some terms with Gensei with the goal of reinstating him as the successor to the Suou family. And, naturally, the conversation came toward him being given the condition of becoming the student council president.

"…I see."

"I'm really sorry, okay? Even though it's the both of us running together, I ended up using it as a bargaining chip without asking you first. But it goes without saying I definitely don't want us to switch roles or anything. And regarding Granddad… I'll just find another way to convince him somehow."

That last part was a bit of a lie though.

As it stood, Masachika had no idea how to even begin persuading Gensei at all. Honestly, he couldn't even imagine getting another concession from his grandfather. Still, it was also undeniably true that Masachika had no intention of pushing Alisa aside to become the next student council president himself.

In response to Masachika's words—a mix of honesty and deceit—Alisa gave him a half-hearted nod and spoke hesitantly.

"*Hmm*, well, that's… Anyways, I do want to ask you one thing."

"Hm?"

Seeing Alisa stop halfway with a contemplative expression, Masachika also halted and turned back to face her.

"About getting reinstated as the successor to the Suou family… Did you consult Yuki-san about it?" Alisa asked with a serious look on her face.

Suddenly hearing Yuki's name out of nowhere, Masachika flinched for a moment before answering.

"No… I told her after, but…"

“…Was she angry?”

Alisa’s words struck at the heart of the matter, and Masachika could only hold his breath.

“I knew it,” Alisa muttered, noticing his reaction. “I understand that you had no ill intentions, Masachika-kun… but I get her reaction.”

“…Yeah. I get it now—I shouldn’t have tried to take back the position of successor without Yuki’s consent.”

“I mean that’s part of it, but…”

“But?”

“Uh, umm…”

Alisa faltered, looking at him as if trying to gauge his reaction.

“No need to hold back. Tell me what’s on your mind. I’ll accept whatever you have to say,” Masachika urged her.

Faced with his direct words, Alisa started to talk after thinking for a moment.

“Uh, how should I put it… About the duty of being the successor to the Suou family? And the thing about becoming a diplomat… Masachika-kun, you’re always talking about how it’s a burden, like it’s some bad deal…”

“…But it’s a burden, isn’t it? It’s not something anyone would do for fun.”

“That’s… only true for you, Masachika-kun, right?”

At Alisa’s comment, Masachika fell into a brief silence, but quickly shook his head.

“It’s not like Yuki wants to be one either. Actually, I’ve never even heard her once say she wanted to become a diplomat.”

Yuki had often shared her various dreams with him since she was young, but strangely enough, she'd never once mentioned wanting to be a diplomat. And it was because of it that Masachika concluded that Yuki was only reluctantly going with it… Still, Alisa tilted her head skeptically.

"Even if that's the case… it doesn't mean she feels no sense of purpose in it, right? If someone were to suddenly tell her, 'I'll take over from here because it looks tough,' about something she takes pride in, wouldn't that make her pretty angry?"

Alisa's words left Masachika frozen in place. The idea that there was a possibility Yuki might genuinely want to be a diplomat or the head of the Suou family was something that had never crossed his mind.

"At the very least, if it were me—even if it wasn't something I wanted from the start—the moment I decide to do it, I'd want to see it through no matter how tough it might be. And if someone who thinks of that role as a burden were to come to me and say *they'd* take it on, I'd think, 'I'm not going to leave it to someone who'd do it grudgingly. Do you really think I'll shove it off to someone who clearly doesn't want it?'" Alisa continued her explanation, albeit carefully choosing her words.

And it left Masachika completely speechless. Treating the responsibilities of the Suou family as nothing more than a burden—just that thought alone could be an insult to Yuki, who'd been bearing said responsibilities. He had never even imagined such a thing.

"Of course, everything I just said is only my guess, okay? I mean, only Yuki-san herself would know how she actually feels…"

"Yeah… I get it now."

Although it was already very late at this point, Masachika finally realized just how self-centered and arrogant his actions had been.

"I just… wanted to set her free," he murmured softly, wording his lingering regret.

He recalled how Yuki had cried on the bed like a child. Just thinking about how much she must've been carrying on those small shoulders was enough to make him feel like crying himself. Even after recovering from her childhood asthma and regaining her strength—the strength that could take her anywhere—she still remained bound to that household.

And all that did was make Masachika truly want to somehow free his sister, from the bottom of his heart.

"Yeah, I understand that you care about Yuki-san, Masachika-kun," Alisa said as she moved closer, gently touching his right arm in a comforting manner.

Looking down at her hand, Masachika continued, speaking haltingly.

"Yeah… I guess for me, it was just about taking back the responsibility that belonged to me from the beginning… But to her, it was like I practically dismissed all of her efforts over the past few years… In the end, even wanting to set her free, it was all just my ego…"

"…Don't think too badly of it, okay? Even Yuki-san knows for sure that you had no ill intentions."

Hearing Alisa's comforting words of reassurance, Masachika recalled what Kyotarou said the day before and let out a wry smile.

"Haha, my dad said something similar yesterday… He said that as long as we both continued to care about each other, everything'll be okay."

It was a soft murmur, as if he was speaking more to himself than to Alisa. Then, he suddenly looked up with a smile.

"Sorry. I got a li'l too negative back there. But thank you. What you said really helped."

"…Really?"

"Yeah… Anyways, let's go."

He turned on his heel and started walking toward school again, but suddenly, he felt a warm touch that enveloped his left arm from behind, pulling him close.

"Oh…?"

Taken aback by the sudden action, he heard a soft whisper as Alisa passed by his side.

【I care about you, too.】

Immediately after, his arm was released, and the person in question who'd just embraced him briskly walked ahead. Masachika stood there, dumbfounded, watching her retreating figure while awkwardly rubbing the arm that she had held.

…Was that supposed to be comforting?

Alisa continued to walk on without looking back, acting as if nothing had happened. Her back, so clearly expressing, "Don't ask what I said!" made Masachika chuckle.

【Иятоже. (Me too.)】 he whispered quietly.

He chuckled once again at his partner, who naturally still didn't turn back. Then, erasing his smile as he looked down, he resumed his steps and thoughts.

Taking away the responsibilities of being the successor to the Suou family… Does it really not help her? Then, what should I—

Meanwhile, Alisa, who was walking ahead, was also lost in her own thoughts.

If I give up on becoming the student council president… can Masachika return to the Suou family?

That was the condition set by Masachika's grandfather, after all.

To put an end to his regrets and fulfill his wishes, Masachika had to achieve that goal. Naturally, Alisa wanted to help him accomplish it.

However—

I mean, I know I want to become the student council president… But can I really let my personal desire close off Masachika-kun's own future? Especially since it involves his family. Shouldn't I prioritize that…?

Becoming the student council president was something Alisa, who always wanted to stand at the top, had aimed for since the beginning. It would also finally validate her way of life. Additionally, she now wanted to meet the expectations of those who supported her—people like Masachika and Sayaka. But is that really something that should be prioritized over Masachika's well-being?

If I become the vice president instead… No, but still…

Lost in her thoughts, Alisa mechanically continued walking toward the school.

With a slight gap between them, both looking down a bit, Alisa and Masachika silently headed toward the academy. Immersed in their thoughts, neither of them noticed the gazes of the increasing number of Seirei Academy students as they approached the school.

"Oh, isn't that Kujou-san and Kuze-san over there?"

"It really is. Are they coming to school together…?"

"The atmosphere around them seems off though…"

"Hm? Hey, those two."

"Eh? Ah, they're that pair in the election campaign. Walking to school together in the morning… *Hmm*, are they actually dating or something?"

"No, but… doesn't something seem off? They aren't talking at all, and there's this weird distance between them."

"Are they fighting…? Wait no, if they were, wouldn't they be walking further apart?"

"Wait, could it be… they just happened to arrive at the same time and haven't even noticed each other?"

"No way. Not noticing each other when they're that close is strange… But seriously, what's up with them?"

“It’s a mystery…”

Under the curious gazes of students all around, the two of them remained completely unaware of the attention they were drawing, even as they passed through the school gates. Under this intense scrutiny, they made their way toward the shoe lockers. Changing their shoes, they headed toward Class 1-B, and just as they slid the door open, Alisa came to a sudden stop.

“Whoa, what’s wrong, Alya?”

Following right behind, Masachika had nearly stepped on Alisa’s heel as she came to a sudden halt. Peering over Alisa’s head into the classroom, his eyes widened in shock at the unexpected sight that greeted them.

“What the heck!?”

Chapter 7 - And The Culprit Was Exposed

“No, seriously, what is that…?”

“……”

Masachika’s face twitched as he stared at the overwhelming display by the window from the entrance of the classroom. In front of him, Alisa was utterly speechless.

What they saw was a mountain of gifts, something that had no place in a classroom. It was placed by the window on Alisa’s desk, amounting to twenty—maybe more—presents. Or at least, that’s what it appeared to be. What looked odd, however, was the lack of wrapping or ribbons on some of the “presents”, making it unclear whether they were actually presents or just random knick knacks.

“Ah, crap.”

“Looks like she’s here.”

“Ah~, we’ve run out of time, huh~?”

Voices murmured around them. As Masachika and Alisa looked over, they saw three students standing by the blackboard, each holding colored chalk and writing large letters and drawings. They seemed to be drawing images of party poppers, ribbons, and what looked like an unfinished cake. The large text they’d drawn so far read “Happy Birth—”

“Eh, is this for me?” Alisa muttered, clearly taken aback by the gesture as she glanced at the mound of presents on her desk and the unfinished drawings and text.

Upon hearing her, the three students at the blackboard, along with the rest of the class, exchanged sheepish grins, muttering variations of “Oops…” and “Well, this is awkward.”

“I mean, when we came in this morning, we saw this huge pile of presents and a birthday card, so we thought, ‘We gotta roll with this,’ y’know?” one of the students by the blackboard said.

“Yeah, yeah. Well, I guess we weren’t able to finish in time though…” added another.

One of the students who’d been working on the drawings abruptly set down the chalk and started clapping.

“Happy birthday, Kujou-san! Congrats!”

Their attempt to push through the awkwardness with sheer enthusiasm was painfully obvious. The rest of the class, despite wearing awkward smiles, began to join in, and before long, the classroom was filled with applause.

“Happy birthday, Kujou-san!”

“Happy birthday!”

“Congrats!”

“Happy birthday!”

“Congrats! I don’t know if today’s the actual day, though!”

“Huh, it ain’t? We’ve already gone this far though…”

“How does no one know? For the record, it was two days ago!” Masachika quipped abruptly.

“Congrats! Happy belated birthday then!”

“Sheer enthusiasm won’t get you anywhere, Murayama!”[1]

Masachika interjected, noticing Alisa’s unsure expression as she debated whether she should point out that her birthday had already passed, and decided to save her the trouble. Yet, the boy who started clapping only clapped even louder, as if trying to drown out Masachika’s quip, prompting another round of laughter from the class.

“Anyway, congrats!”

“Congrats! We’re late, but still!”

The applause only grew in its momentum. Someone even added a whistle into the mix.

With that, a whirlwind of cheers enveloped Class 1-B that morning. In the midst of it all, Alisa, clearly flustered, managed a somewhat ambiguous—yet undeniably pleased—smile. She lightly covered her mouth with her hand as she said, “Thank you… everyone. Thank you so much…”

She was unmistakably in a state of utter bashfulness, a stark contrast to the cool expression she usually wore. This rarely seen side of such an overwhelmingly beautiful girl pierced straight through the hearts of all her classmates, regardless of gender.

“““““““!!”””””””

Faced with such a sight, the volume of applause and whistling increased, and students from other classes began to peer into the room, drawn in by the noise.

“Huh, it’s Kujou-san’s birthday?”

“Whoa, look at that mountain of presents!”

“Is this by some sorta fan club maybe…?”

“I don’t know what’s happening, but congrats!”

“It’s already been two days, though!”

As the uproar grew even louder and louder, Masachika tried to calm things down with yet another biting response. But with Alisa blushing bashfully behind his back, there was no way things were gonna settle soon. The circle of applause and congratulations only expanded, even roping in those who had no idea what was going on.

“What’s going on here?”

Just then, a voice cut through the chaos, quieting the room down a little. It was none other than the first year member of the disciplinary committee, Sayaka Taniyama. Her glasses gleamed beneath her bluntly cut bangs as she stepped into the classroom, her sharp gaze unshaken by the ruckus. Those who’d been swept up by the excitement suddenly donned sheepish looks on their faces as they lowered their hands.

“Alisa-san…? Good morning. What’s exactly happening here?”

“Good morning, Sayaka-san. I’m not sure either… I just walked into *this*…”

Following Alisa’s gaze, Sayaka glanced at the blackboard and then at the pile of presents on her desk, pushing up her glasses as she did so.

“Birthday presents…? Your birthday was two days ago. Why now?”

“Well, I mean, the actual day was on a weekend. So I guess those who couldn’t give it then just left their presents on her desk this morning. And then the rest of the class kinda hopped on the bandwagon…” Masachika explained before furrowing his brow in thought. “…Wait. Who put the first present here anyway?”

He shifted his gaze back to the giant pile of gifts. It didn’t resemble the cartoonish mountain of giant boxes you’d see in manga or anime. Instead, there was just one large gift box, with the rest being thinly wrapped packages or smaller, hand-sized boxes. Scattered around and on top of these were things like snacks, drinks, and school supplies that were clearly purchased recently.

“Yeah, you guys definitely just bought these just now… I mean look, these presents are so random.” Masachika commented, glancing around the room.

In response, the class, which had been swimming in enthusiasm just moments ago, all wore sheepish greens, as if to say, “Caught us, huh?”

“Well, I mean the presents were just sitting there. Thought it’d be weird to ignore it and do nothing myself…”

“Sorry, it’s just something I put together quickly, but I thought it was at least better than nothing…”

“Ah, it’s not like that. If anything I’m very happy. I feel bad since I can’t give you guys anything in return right now, but… thank you. I’ll gladly accept these. There’s… a ton of oshiruko[2] though…”

When Alisa glanced at the more than five containers of oshiruko with a slightly conflicted expression, the entire class turned their gaze toward Masachika as if to ask for his help.

“Welp, anyways, let’s start by picking up the little things… That’s right, I can just put some on my desk,” Masachika said as he cleared his throat, feeling a bit awkward.

Masachika pushed his desk next to Alisa’s and, together, they started sorting the pile of snacks, drinks, and stationery by arranging them in separate piles. What remained were several neatly wrapped gifts, presumably left by someone other than their classmates.

Lifting each one, Masachika checked their backs and sides, but none featured any messages, cards, or hints as to who’d left them. The only clue was a sticker with a ribbon wishing “Happy Birthday!!”, indicating that these were indeed birthday presents, but…

“None of these have names on them…”

“Wait a sec, now that I think ’bout it, not many people know when your birthday is, amirite? I guess aside from the people you invited to your birthday party the other day… Anyone else come to mind?”

“…None that I can think of.”

A mountain of presents from an unknown sender(s), with no clue as to who they are no less. Facing a growing sense of unease, Masachika and Alisa hesitated to touch them even further. Just then, Sayaka, who’d been watching quietly, suddenly spoke up.

“Mm-hmm, things are starting to look a little suspicious, aren’t they? How about we, the disciplinary committee, seize these for now?”

“Uh, why?”

“Bringing in unnecessary items like these to school is a rule violation in the first place, so this whole thing falls under the jurisdiction of the disciplinary committee. What’s more…”

Glancing around the room, Sayaka stepped a little closer to Alisa and Masachika, lowering her voice.

“(There’s also the possibility that this might be some kind of sabotage from your rival candidate’s supporters. I think it’d be best to open them under the supervision of the disciplinary committee.)”

“!!”

Masachika jumped in shock at Sayaka’s suggestion. Though Seirei Academy’s high school student elections could get heated at times, they had never escalated to the point of sabotage (of course not including that one time during the cultural festival).

Still, what Sayaka said was true.

She’s right… It’s not unusual for some people to resort to sneaky harassment when the elections are right around the corner…

If the presents only contained hidden pins or tacks, it would just be a harmless prank at worst. But this was Seirei Academy’s election campaign we’re talking about. There was no denying the possibility that these presents could be bugged with hidden microphones or cameras, allowing the perpetrator to spy on and potentially blackmail Alisa.

I mean, someone as bold as Kiryuin might actually go that far…

Thinking along those lines, Masachika grimaced slightly before giving Sayaka a small nod.

“(Thanks, Sayaka. Been lettin’ my guard down since things have been so peaceful lately.)”

Then, turning toward Alisa, he spoke loud enough for those around them to hear.

“Let’s go with what Sayaka said. I mean, it could even be a gift from one of Yuki’s overzealous supporters.”

“You’re right, I understand. Thank you too, Sayaka.”

“No problem. I’ll call for some backup.”

With that, Sayaka pulled a walkie-talkie out of her pocket.

“Eh, a walkie-talkie?”

While Alisa stared in surprise, Sayaka pressed the push-to-talk button as she spoke into the device.

“This is first-year Taniyama. We have about ten suspicious items in Class 1-B. Requesting backup from three other officers to transport them to the disciplinary committee office. Please respond.”

After releasing the button, there was a short pause before responses started coming one after another from the walkie-talkie.

“First-year Fukunaga here. I’ll be there in ten secs. Over.”

“Why answer if you’re gonna be here that quick!?” Masachika muttered.

“This is Fox. ETA one minute. Over.”

“Oi, what’s with the codename…” Masachika quipped again.

“This is first-year Maesawa. I’m on my way, but I still have to finish my homework for first-period. Over.”

“Don’t come! Just prioritize your homework!”

Masachika’s quips went unheard as Sayaka had long since released the push-to-talk button. Meanwhile, the backup began to arrive one by one, and the group of six, including Masachika, Sayaka, and Alisa, divided the presents among them.

“Seems like your popularity is growing,” Sayaka suddenly spoke to Alisa.

“Eh?”

“That thing earlier. Not many people would’ve casually celebrated your birthday in the past, wouldn’t they?”

Alisa chewed over Sayaka’s calm observation for a moment before slowly breaking into a nod.

“You’re right… But I think it’s something to be happy about. Having everyone in the class wish me like that…”

As the realization gradually sank in, Alisa smiled warmly. Although it was painfully obvious she was shy, her smile conveyed her genuine feelings."

"I was really, really happy."

"...I see."

Glancing at Alisa from the side, Sayaka replied without much of a change in expression, before turning her gaze forward and continuing.

"Be careful. The more attention and popularity you garner, the more people there'll be who resent you."

"...You're right. Thank you."

"Don't worry about it."

Seeing Sayaka act so typically cold while giving meaningful advice, Alisa smiled gently. And right at that moment, she seemed to remember something.

"By the way, Sayaka-san... do disciplinary committee members always carry walkie-talkies?" she asked.

"Yes. As you know, phone usage is prohibited by the school, except for emergencies. Plus, this is more convenient when issuing orders to multiple people at once."

"Yeah, no way at least half of it ain't for fun. You guys just wanna feel like you're some special forces unit, dontcha? Besides, couldn't we have just used some bag instead of callin' for backup?" Masachika suddenly interrupted with a sarcastic comment and a question of his own.

In response, Sayaka raised an eyebrow, looking up at him.

"Are you suggesting we should've just carelessly tossed these gifts into a plastic trash bag? Suspicious or not, that would be quite rude."

"Yeah, I guess. But we still could've just asked some classmates to help out instead."

"Considering the possibility of them being dangerous, it's best to avoid involving outsiders as much as possible."

"...Such lengths all just to sound all reasonable... Didn't you just wanna try calling for backup yourself?"

"Of course not," Sayaka shot back with a calm and composed face.

"By the way, Sayaka, do you have a codename?" Masachika stared at her intensely as he asked.

"! N-no, I don't. There's no way I would..."

"*Hmm~?*"

"What is it?"

"I mean, you hesitated a li'l."

"That's because you asked a weird question out of nowhere," Sayaka said as she turned her head with a huff, quickening her pace to the disciplinary committee office.

But as soon as they entered the room and placed the gifts on the long table, the boy who'd introduced himself as "Fox" earlier grinned at Sayaka.

"Mission complete then? Noir."

"Looks like you *do* have one."

★·☆·★

"Alrighty then, let's begin opening the presents."

""""""Yes!"""""""

In response to Chisaki's call, several sharp, powerful voices answered in unison.

It was currently after school. Masachika and Alisa had come to the disciplinary committee office, where many of its members, including the president and the vice president, had gathered.

“Uh, thanks for gathering here… I guess? But… isn’t this going a li’l overboard? Look, there are more people here than actual gifts, right?” Masachika commented as he gave a wry smile.

Even so, Chisaki, the disciplinary committee president, gave him a puzzled look.

“No one’s gonna open them, though? I’ll be the only one handling the unwrapping,” she explained.

“Come again? Uh, why’s that?”

“Look, I’m the only one who can handle it if something dangerous pops up.”

“Dangerous…? You serious?”

“Handle it… how, exactly?”

Masachika and Alisa both reacted skeptically to Chisaki’s bold claim. Yet, all she did was nod earnestly and directed her gaze behind them.

“I’m being completely serious here. You guys should stand behind those three with the shields, just in case.”

Following her gaze, they saw three others equipped with transparent, reinforced plastic riot shields—the kind Masachika had only seen on TV used by police. His face twitched in disbelief.

“This ain’t some bomb squad… Wait, why does the disciplinary committee even *have* stuff like that?”

“Riot control, of course.”

“There’s absolutely no way you need that here… Wait no, I shouldn’t say that after everything that’s happened here…”

Masachika’s expression broke into that of a conflicted look as he recalled the chaos of the recent cultural festival. He then glanced around at the others and tilted his head.

“Wait a sec, if you’re the only one opening the presents, what’re these guys here for?”

“What for? *Hmm*, we don’t know what we’re dealing with, so it’s best to have as much manpower as possible.”

“Manpower? What exactly are you even expecting?”

“…Worst case scenario? Kotoribako[3].”

“SERIOUSLY, WHAT THE HELL ARE YOU EXPECTING!?”

“Well, ‘Sunshine Lotus Jewel of Victory’ isn’t reacting to anything here, so I think we’re safe.”

“There it is. The mysterious late-game dungeon equipment…”

Masachika glanced at the black prayer beads wrapped around Chisaki’s right wrist with a distant look in his eyes. Upon closer inspection, the Four Season Sisters, led by Sumire, present were each armed with the same replica swords they’d used during the cultural festival. Others in the room came equipped with brass knuckles, batons, and even talismans. And Sayaka… wait, is that a Japanese war fan she’s holding?

“…Seriously, what have you guys been doing? Secretly fighting off otherworldly threats after school?” Masachika quipped with a tinge of exasperation.

But in response, all the disciplinary committee members, including Chisaki, furrowed their brows as they gazed off into the distance.

“Don’t act like I just made any sense! What’s with that ‘Uh, *hmm*, I guess you could say that?’ look on your faces!”

“What exactly is going on at this school…? I’m starting to lose faith that I can really be its top student here…”

“Well, I mean Prez’s managing just fine, so…” Masachika said, albeit trailing off at the end as a thought crossed his mind.

That “other side” of school might’ve actually existed, and might very well be handled entirely by the vice president of the student council standing right before him. He shut his mouth.

“…I guess we should listen to the expert.”

“Right, huh?”

Ignorance was bliss, after all. Resigning with that in mind, Masachika and Alisa quietly withdrew behind the shield, pressing themselves against the wall. Confirming that they’ve done so, Chisaki turned back to face the present on the desk.

“Alrighty then, let’s start unwrapping.”

“”””””We’re counting on you!!”””””””

Startled by the slightly over the top response from the disciplinary committee, Masachika and Alisa observed Chisaki’s actions closely as she immediately reached for the largest gift box.

“Well then, first up’s this big one… I’ll open it now, m’kay?”

“Ah, yes. Please.”

After receiving permission from Alisa, the recipient of the gift, Chisaki carefully peeled off the tape without tearing any of the wrapping paper.

“Woah, that’s amazing. That ain’t easy at all.”

“Yep, I know right? Even if you’re super careful, the tape always ends up ripping the top of the paper, showing its white insides.”

“I getcha. Like, sometimes I want to save pretty wrapping paper and reuse it, but I always rip it. I always end up tossing it in the end~”

As they mulled over such trivial matters, Chisaki folded the removed wrapping paper.

“Just so you know, the reason I’m opening it so carefully isn’t only because it belongs to someone else. I’m being cautious here in case there’s some razor blade hidden in the paper or something,” she explained.

“Oh, right.”

“Well, I’d already developed an immunity to razor blades a long time ago, though.”

“A long time ago, huh…”

As the two stared blankly at Chisaki's completely un-cute explanation, she finally placed her hands on the actual box.

"Okay, opening it now."

"""""""!!"""""""

The surrounding disciplinary committee members immediately tensed up at Chisaki's words, prompting Masachika and Alisa to flinch once again.

"One, two, three!"

"""""""!!"""""""

Seriously, what's with your dramatic reactions!?

Feeling too intimidated to say anything out loud, Masachika made a snarky comment in his mind.

Opening the box with a pop and peeking inside, Chisaki then reached in and pulled out a… handmade plush.

So white and fluffy…

"Is that… a goat? A sheep? Wait no, a cat?"

"Um, I dunno…"

Masachika tilted his head alongside Alisa.

It had no horns or ears, and its face was so fuzzy that it was hard to make out what it actually was. Still, it had a relaxed expression that was oddly cute… Or at least from a distance. No, actually, it might be a little creepy. I mean, look at its red eyes.

"…It's definitely homemade though."

Flipping the plush toy over in her hands, Chisaki carefully inspected it from all angles before digging back into the box.

"No sign of a message. No name either."

"""""""!"""""""

"You don't really need to react to that…"

For what felt like the umpteenth time today, Masachika couldn't help but interject as he quipped at the disciplinary committee members' reactions, who were either overly enthusiastic or just too darn well-trained. Meanwhile, Chisaki, who'd been examining the plush toy again, suddenly froze in place.

She grabbed the fluffy plush tightly, feeling it though her fingers before furrowing her brow.

"Something's inside."

"""""""!!"""""""

This time, not only the disciplinary committee members, but both Masachika and Alisa's expressions changed abruptly. The tension in the room spiked as Chisaki continued to probe the inside of the plush with her fingers.

"It's hard… and rectangular? No, it's pretty round at the corners and… it's about the size of a palm…" she described what she felt, before releasing her grip and turning to Alisa.

"Whatcha wanna do, Alya-chan? We can take it apart and check what's inside if you'd like…"

At Chisaki's question, Alisa hesitated for a few seconds as her expression stiffened, before shaking her head.

"No, that's a last resort. Let's check the others first, and if we still can't identify who's behind all this… then, please."

"Yep, gotcha."

Nodding seriously in response to Alisa's request, Chisaki reached for the next present. Watching her closely, Masachika gently nudged at Alisa's arm.

"…You good?"

"…Yes, I'm fine."

Having found something hard and unidentifiable inside the handmade plush, from an unknown sender no less, Masachika thought she'd be anxious and maybe even scared, especially as she was the one directly involved in this whole debacle. Yet, Alisa only gave him a resolute nod, maintaining her composure. Impressed by her strength, Masachika felt Alisa place her hand on his and whisper.

【…Because you're here with me.】

"!"

For once, Masachika didn't blush or internally combust in embarrassment when faced with Alisa's raw sense of trust. Instead, he simply vowed in his heart to protect her no matter what.

Before either of them knew it, they'd clasped their hands tightly together. As the two watched on, the unwrapping continued…

"…Store-bought lotion. No signs of it being opened prior."

Contrary to the tense atmosphere that'd choked the room earlier, the actual presents themselves were relatively tame.

Items included handkerchiefs, accessories, and cosmetics—typical gifts for a girl. What's more, the only other handmade item was some handkerchief with Alisa's initials embroidered on it.

There were no snacks too, which were actually more common presents than you'd think. Instead, the presents they checked were all skewed toward objects that polished or adorned one's appearance. While that was a bit concerning, considering the circumstances in the first place, food would've been even scarier, so it wasn't a major issue. The *real* problem, instead, was…

"No messages or names."

"""""""!!"""""""

In the end, not a single item revealed anything that could help identify the sender at all. Given that was the case, it became clear that the sender was either a group acting with a shared purpose, or more likely, a sole individual.

It's really starting to smell fishy… Worst-case scenario, we might have to just chuck everything away. Quite unfortunate…

As Masachika considered this, Alisa's hand started to fidget all the sudden, as if she were feeling uneasy.

Hm? Did I squeeze her hand too hard?

Thinking he might've been holding her hand too tightly, Masachika loosened his grip slightly. Alisa then adjusted her own grip and began tracing her thumb gently along Masachika's palm.

Hm? Ohhhh…

Realizing she was attempting to communicate with the "palm flick" method he'd once taught her, he instinctively began to decode the message.

"Hug me."

Instantaneously, Masachika pictured the image of Alisa whispering, "I'm scared… C-can you hold me tightly?" with tears in her eyes. Yet, as he glanced sideways, all he saw was an awkward look on her face as her lips twitched slightly in embarrassment. Faced with such a stark contrast, he inwardly yelled.

Oooooiii!! Think you could pull a fast one on me just because you did it out of nowhere!? Don't underestimate meeee!!

As he breathed heavily in frustration internally, Masachika traced his stiff fingers along Alisa's palm to send a response, feigning ignorance.

"What?"

Out of the corner of his eye, Masachika saw Alisa's lips curl into a smirk. Pretending not to notice it, he stood there as Alisa's fingers started tracing another message.

"Take off."

Seriously, d'you actually think you can get away with this? Sure, I mean it's just a slight difference in finger placement and one character off, but…[4]

While mentally cracking a snarky response in his mind, Masachika flicked his response.

“What?”

“Ribbon.”

Ribbon?

Reading this, Masachika instinctively looked at the ribbon tied in Alisa’s hair.

Does she want me to untie this? But she said “take off,” so maybe…

Masachika’s eyes then drifted off to another ribbon—the one adorned at the front of her neck. The moment he did, Alisa shot him a piercingly cold glare.

“(What the hell are you looking at?)”

“(Eh, uhhh…)”

“(Pervert,)” Alisa uttered in a low tone before quickly turning forward.

Haaaah… How unreasonable.

Masachika grumbled inwardly in response, but when he noticed Alisa chuckling, he simply shrugged.

…Well, as long as she’s in a better mood.

With that thought, Masachika, too, turned his gaze back ahead. But just then, Alisa glanced up at his profile and, while touching her necktie with her hand, she whispered mischievously.

【Wanna undo it?】

Her seductive whisper reverberated in his ears and made Masachika freeze in place. Alisa leaned in closer, continuing in a sweet, teasing tone.

【I don’t mind… if it’s you, m’kay?】

I swear, I’ll actually pin you down.

Masachika seriously considered that for a moment as he maintained a straight face against the sheer force of her words. How unfortunate it was that they were in the disciplinary committee office—had they been alone at home, he might've actually done something.

Blissfully unaware of how close Masachika was to losing his self control, Alisa turned forward with a satisfied expression, wearing her typical "He's got no idea what I'm saying~♪" look.

It's you who doesn't know jack, y'know? Want me to give you a real taste of how terrifying a teenage boy can be?

Masachika's cheek twitched on the side opposite to where Alisa was. While mentally flashing a strained smile at her, he exhaled and composed himself. Now wasn't the time to be thrown off by his partner's casually muttered provocative Russian.

Hmph. Lucky for you, I'm a gentleman!

With one last mental remark, Masachika redirected his attention to Chisaki. It looked like she'd opened nearly all the presents for the most part, with only two thin packages left.

Opening one of them, Chisaki pulled out a piece of clothing, and—

"!"

A faint thud echoed throughout the room as an envelope sealed with a floral sticker fell to the floor. Chisaki's eyebrows twitched in surprise. Finally, they had come across some sorta message card, prompting Masachika, Alisa, and the rest present to hold their breaths.

"Woah!" Chisaki suddenly exclaimed.

At her shout, everyone's eyes darted up from the envelope to see—a bright red negligee. And not just any negligee. It was so skimpy and thin; the kind that was so transparent you could see right through it.

Staring at such a risque piece of garment, that literally screamed the words lewd in its very existence, Chisaki murmured her thoughts out loud involuntarily.

"…Would Touya like this kinda thing too?"

“““““Onee-sama?”””””

“Ah! Ahem! Umm, it doesn’t seem to be bugged with anything… Nothing unusual here.”

Prompted by the Four Season Sisters’ deadpan looks, Chisaki quickly glanced over the negligee before hastily setting it on the table. She then straightened her expression, took a deep breath, and picked up the envelope with a sharp, determined look.

“I’ll open it.”

With those words, everyone’s sense of alertness peaked once more. A letter from the person who’d sent such a scandalous garment—what kind of message would it contain? As their concentrated gazes bore down, Chisaki opened the envelope and pulled out a few sheets of what appeared to be a letter…

“This is—!”

“Four Season Sisters, unsheathe!!”

“““Unsheathe!!”””

“That’s way too fast!!”

The overlapping sound of four swords being drawn pierced the room, and Masachika, half in panic, shouted in protest. Still, the Four Season Sisters, already holding their imitation swords, didn’t flinch even an inch. Chisaki waved them off with one hand and then approached Masachika and Alisa.

“…Alya-chan. No, Kuze-kun, actually.”

“Eh, me?”

“Yeah, c’mere for a sec.”

Masachika skimmed through the letter Chisaki handed him, and his face twitched in disgust.

“Ugh, woah.”

The letter was filled with what could only be described as the ramblings of a stereotypical stalker; creepy poetry-like lines praising Alisa’s hair, her skin, her eyes, and her figure. It was filled with an endless barrage of comments about Alisa’s appearance, written in a tone that made Masachika’s skin crawl. Despite being all flowery praise, its tone was deeply unsettling. It was so unpleasant that he didn’t even dare to read it aloud. Naturally, no name was signed at the end, instead being closed with something like, “This outfit would suit someone like you (of course, after being paraphrased to sound more appropriate).”

What a full-blown pervert…

The image of a deranged fan sending risque clothing to their favorite idol sprang to mind, and Masachika scowled.

“What? What’s wrong?” Alisa urged him with concern, growing impatient.

“No, it’s just…”

Masachika hesitated, closing the letter. He understood why Chisaki had shown it to him first—this was definitely not something you’d want to show to the person it was meant for. But hiding it wouldn’t satisfy Alisa either.

Ngghhhhh!!

After a few seconds of painful deliberation, and exchanging a glance with Chisaki, Masachika handed the letter to Alisa.

“Don’t force yourself to read it all. The beginning already gives the gist of it.”

“Hm? Okay…”

With a puzzled frown, Alisa accepted the letter and began to read. Her expression quickly twisted in revulsion.

“W-what the hell…? Disgusting!”

She tossed the letter away as if she had touched something filthy. Catching it before it hit the floor, Masachika handed it back to Chisaki, watching Alisa with concern.

“Alya… You okay?”

“…I-I’m fine… Just got goosebumps, that’s all…”

Rubbing her arms, Alisa shivered visibly. Chisaki once again looked down at the letter and analyzed it with a serious expression.

“Don’t worry, Alya-chan. If it comes down to it, we’ll track this guy down; I’ll even run a fingerprint analysis,” she spoke clearly and firmly.

“Y-yes… please do.”

“It’ll be okay. If you need, I can walk you to and from school everyday,” Masachika offered.

“Masachika-kun… Th-thank you. But I’ll be fine…”

“Don’t hesitate. You can’t be too careful if we’re really dealin’ with a stalker. I’ll be by your side, even if you don’t like it.”

“Masachika-kun…”

“Of course, we at the disciplinary committee will also lend our support. We’ve gotta stop this before it escalates any further, for the perpetrator’s own good, too.”

“Sarashina-senpai… Understood.”

Hearing such reassuring words from her partner and senior, Alisa regained a bit of her composure as she straightened her back. Exhaling softly, she then looked directly at Chisaki.

“I’m alright now. Please continue,” she spoke firmly

“…Yep, this is the last one.”

With a strong yet gentle gaze directed at Alisa, Chisaki returned to the table and picked up the final package. Unwrapping it revealed yet another piece of clothing. Judging by its shape, it looked to be an evening gown. Its back was dramatically open and exposed, and there was a huge slit that slashed boldly up the side. It ran up from the hem, past the thigh, and all the way to the hip.

"……"

An overwhelming silence filled the room. Without a word, Chisaki placed the dress on the desk. Then, picking up her shinai[5] leaning against the table, she pointed it sharply at the entrance and spoke.

"To battle. The enemy's the handicrafts club."

"""""""Roger!!"""""""

With a spirited shout, the disciplinary committee members, excluding the three assigned to protect Masachika and Alisa, swiftly organized themselves as they marched out in formation. Amongst them was Sayaka, gripping her war fan. Masachika watched her with a distant look.

She's really getting into it, huh…

A few minutes later, hurried footsteps echoed in the hallway as members of the handicrafts club were dragged into the disciplinary committee office one after another. Accustomed to frequent disciplinary action from the disciplinary committee, the summoned girls knelt on the carpet without needing to be told. Staring them down, Chisaki slapped her shinai against her palm with a sharp snap.

"So? Do you know why you've been brought here?"

Despite Chisaki's imposing question, the members of the handicrafts club, all too familiar with the situation, responded without a hint of fear.

"What's this about? We didn't do nothin' today!"

"This is a blatant abuse of authority! How dare you interrupt our artistic endeavors without any justifiable reason or warrant!"

“Exactly! If we don’t bring our inspirations and ideas to life immediately, they slip away!”

With a chorus of complaints, the girls belonging to the handicrafts club voiced their protests. Chisaki’s brow twitched in irritation, and she reached for the dress on the desk.

“Reeeeally~? And might this be your so-called ‘artistic endeavor’…?”

Lifting the evening gown that featured a dramatic slit, Chisaki held it up as if displaying evidence, prompting a predictable reaction from one particular individual.

“Oh that’s me… I made that present for Kujou-san.”

“Knew it was you, Slit.”

“Hm? Huh…? Kuze-kun, whatcha doin’ here?”

Noticing Masachika and Alisa by the wall, the girl with her long black hair tied into a ponytail—often referred to by Masachika as “Slit-paisen”[6]—turned to face them. Masachika met her gaze with a cold look.

“Thanks to a certain *someone* leaving suspicious gifts anonymously, we’ve had to go through the trouble of opening everything under the disciplinary committee’s supervision,” he spoke in a resentful tone.

“Suspicious…? C’mon, it’s just a normal present.”

Following her words, the members of the handicrafts club elegantly sat in perfect seizas[7] with refined demeanors as they addressed Chisaki with a dignified air.

“That’s right! These are offerings to the goddess of our ideal body type! There’s nothing shady about them!”

“Goddess of… your ideal body type? What’s that even supposed to mean?”

“Just look and you’ll understand!”

Unfazed even before the school's revered lead disciplinarian, one of the girls dramatically pointed at Alisa, causing her to flinch.

"Look at that height! That face's size! Those shoulders! The length of her legs! And her waist so impossibly thin compared to her chest and hips! There's not a single flabby spot on that flawless, perfect body line!! If that ain't a goddess, then what is!?"

"Right. Guess we found the one who wrote that creepy letter."

"What d'you mean creepy!?"

"Siddown."

As the girl stood up in excitement, Chisaki held her down with the tip of her shinai. Although it appeared as though Chisaki was merely resting the tip on her shoulder, she was exerting enough pressure to the point where the girl couldn't even stand. She trembled for a few seconds before reluctantly returning to her seiza, visibly frustrated. By the way, not that it mattered, but where did that refined attitude go?

"Alright, I get it… So you guys sent these presents to Alya-chan? With no other ulterior motives, right?"

"…That's right."

"Then why didn't you write who it's from?" Chisaki questioned.

At this, the members of the handicrafts club all glanced away with awkward, embarrassed smiles.

"I mean… it's kinda embarrassing, ain't it?"

"We're not even close… We're just fans from afar…"

"I'm satisfied with just thinking about how my gift will adorn the body of a goddess…"

"Plus, telling her it's from us would feel like we're expecting a thank you or some acknowledgement. That feels kinda ballsy…"

"It kinda lowers the purity of the offering too. Or something like that?"

“What’s with the sudden humble act…?” Chisaki asked as she scratched her head with a mixture of exasperation and irritation, prompting Masachika to quickly interject.

“Gimme a sec. How did the handicrafts club even know when Alya’s birthday was?”

“Hm? Oh, we found out when Miyamae-san visited us…”

“…Of course it was her.”

It made sense. Nonoa had been invited to Alya’s birthday party after all; it wouldn’t be strange for her to casually mention it in passing. And given the handicrafts club’s somewhat misguided passion, it wouldn’t be surprising if they had connections with Nonoa, who also worked as a model for a brand managed by her family.

As Masachika and Alisa came to terms with this revelation, Chisaki picked up the mysterious stuffed animal—the one that looked like nothing they’d seen before.

“Alrighty, one last thing. There’s something inside of this… What is it?”

“Ah… um, it’s nothing weird, I promise! There’s a button you gotta press; it makes a sound!” a girl, presumably the creator of the stuffed toy, raised her voice in a panic.

“Really? A sound?”

Curious about a weirdly elaborate mechanism for a handmade plush, Chisaki squeezed the stuffed animal again, probing its insides. Watching this, Masachika and Alisa both let out relieved sighs at the girl’s explanation.

“Looks like it was nothing this whole time.”

“Yeah… how relieving. Honestly, this whole thing was one big clusterfuck.”

“Well, at least they had no malicious intent.”

“…True.”

As it turned out, all their worries were unfounded, with Masachika and Alisa sharing relieved smiles.

“Hm? Ah. This it?”

Just then, Chisaki seemed to find the button, pressing her fingers firmly into the stuffed toy.

“Ngwoeeaaahhh!!”

A bone-chilling shriek suddenly filled the disciplinary committee office. It sounded like a goat’s cry distorted mixed with bizarre mechanical noises, a twisted sound that struck a deep sense of revulsion. Almost everyone froze up in place, like paralyzed prey that just heard a monstrous roar at close range… Meanwhile, the student who made it spoke up gleefully.

“Whatcha think? Cute, isn’t it? It’s an original character, Nbotta-chan!”

“Send her underground.”

“”””””Roger!!”””””

“Why!?”

The girl was promptly restrained by the Four Season Sisters and dragged out of the disciplinary committee room. Not a single member of the handicrafts club even dared to try and stop them.

“…Where’s this ‘underground’?”

“…Probs best if you don’t ask.”

With the commotion finally over, Masachika and Alisa’s voices echoed emptily in the now-quiet disciplinary committee room.

And so, the strange and troublesome incident came to an end. Alisa, for the time being, would take the gifts home.

“Ah, Alya-chan… About that… You actually gonna wear it?”

“I-I’m not sure… Do you want it, Sarashina-senpai?”

“H-huh? N-no, that’s not what I meant at all!”

“Well, I haven’t decided if I’ll wear it, but since it’s a gift…”

“…Oh, I-I see.”

“…Do you really want it?”

“Not at all!!”

After some awkward back and forth with Chisaki, Alisa decided to take home the risque, red negligee. However…

“Sorry, but this one’s a bit too much…”

Alas, the one thing left behind, that had become a shared trauma for everyone involved, was Nbotta-chan.

The very next day, Nbotta-chan mysteriously vanished from the disciplinary committee office… But no one bothered to search for it.

[1]: Not to be confused with Maruyama (Takeshi).

[2]: A traditional dessert made with red bean paste.

[3]: A Japanese urban legend; a box that curses women and children, causing them to slowly die from illness.

[4]: Alisa initially types (remember, this method of communication of theirs is mimicking a Japanese flick keyboard, often used in phones) “ハグして” (hagushite; meaning “hug me”). During her second time, she types “外して” (hazushite; meaning “remove” or “take off” in this context).

[5]: A shinai (竹刀) is a Japanese sword made from bamboo used in kendo.

[6]: As a reminder: パイセン (paisen) is a youthful slang for “senpai.” Slit is the name Masachika gave her after she showed up to some committee meeting in a dress with a boldly large slit (in like junior high or something I can’t be asked to double check).

[7]: Seiza (正座), literally meaning “proper sitting,” is a traditional way of sitting in Japan, meant to convey respect, particularly toward elders.

Chapter 8 - And So The Seeds Were Sown

Let's rewind back a bit, specifically to lunchtime.

Alisa had left the classroom alone, heading toward the cafeteria. After the heavy damage she sustained from this morning's curry, she thought she'd eat something more gentle on her stomach. As for the sandwich she bought in the morning, she had already given it—no, pushed it onto Maria during break.

"Oh, Alisa~! What a coincidence~"

"Nonoa-san."

She ran into Nonoa, who was also leaving her classroom, stopping her in her tracks.

"Going to the cafeteria today?"

"Yes. You too, Nonoa-san?"

"Yep. Alrighty then, let's go together."

"Ah, yes, sure."

Alisa hesitated for a moment. Shestill wasn't used to being alone with Nonoa, but given that she had no reason to refuse, she went along with it.

It's rare to see Nonoa-san heading to lunch alone. She's usually surrounded by so many people.

That thought crossed her mind, but without dwelling on it, she continued walking toward the cafeteria. As they walked, some passing students called out to her.

"Hey, Kujou-san, happy birthday!"

"Happy birthday~!"

"Y-yeah. Thank you, I guess?"

Ever since this morning, she'd been flooded with congratulations everytime she left the classroom. Given that she wasn't used to it yet, Alisa could only awkwardly respond with a stiff smile. Yet, the students who'd received said smile seemed delighted as they passed by. Watching them, Nonoa spoke in a nonchalant tone, her voice devoid of emotion and sounding almost robotic.

"Wow~ Alisa, you're really gettin' popular now."

"It's really not like that. They're just having fun with it."

"*Reeeally~?* Yeah, I guess there's a hint of playful teasing, but that's not all, right~? Look."

Following Nonoa's gaze, Alisa turned to see the two boys who had just congratulated her. They seemed to be in high spirits, slapping each other on the back and pushing each other playfully.

"To me, they look like guys who're thrilled that the girl they're interested in responded to them."

"…Really?" Alisa said as she turned back forward indifferently, finding it difficult to respond.

"Well, you're not entirely wrong. It's partly teasing, but ain't this still better than being ignored altogether? 'Specially when you're runnin' in the election," Nonoa continued, unfazed.

"I guess that's true."

Nonoa was entirely correct. Still, this whole thing was a new experience to Alisa, so handling this different type of attention was a challenge for her.

Yuki-san would probably easily respond with a perfect smile if she were in my situation…

As Alisa mulled over her rival, who was often described as the very epitome of ladylike grace, she stood in line for the meal ticket machine.

"What's with the serious look~?" Nonoa chimed as she leaned in, abruptly peeking at her face.

“Woah…! Ah, no, um… I was just hoping that I could respond to all this more smoothly,” Alisa explained, deliberately not mentioning Yuki.

Nonoa let out an understanding “Ah~” with half-lidded eyes in response.

“You’re not any good at smiling, huh, Alisa~? I mean~, I guess there’s an appeal to that in its own way, though.”

“Appeal…? Huh, I’m not sure what you mean exactly… But, maybe I should try to have a more friendly smile or something?”

“*Hmm~?* Well, if it’s bothering you that much, maybe you could practice?”

“Right…”

Encouraged by Nonoa’s words, Alisa tried shooting a quick smile as she waited in line, but as she’d expected, it wasn’t quite right. Even she could tell her mouth wasn’t curving up naturally, and that her smile didn’t reach her eyes at all.

“*Haaaah…*”

“Welp, it’s just a matter of gettin’ used to it~… But hey, Alisa, maybe don’t force it like that? Aren’t you sorta tryin’ too hard to smile all brightly?”

“Huh, really?”

“You don’t have to force yourself to flash a big smile~. Just staying calm would make you look more composed, dontcha think~?”

“…Now that you mention it, maybe you’re right.”

Indeed, Nonoa had a point. Up ’til now, Alisa had always rushed to smile and say thank you when someone spoke to her, making it obvious how thrown off she was. If anything, it only made her response seem awkward. If she could just eliminate that slight moment of hesitation, her reaction might come across as much more genuine.

“Oh well, I’ll give it a try,” Alisa said as she placed her food on the table while sitting down.

Just then, a group of three male students happened to pass by. They caught sight of her, their faces lighting up.

“Happy birthday, Kujou-san.”

“Oh, yeah. Heard it’s your birthday. Congrats.”

“Happy birthday~!”

Realizing now was the perfect opportunity, Alisa immediately put her newfound awareness into practice.

“Yes, thank you.”

Without getting flustered, she looked straight into their eyes and thanked them. The three boys, who’d initially approached with teasing grins, widened their eyes in shock for a moment. Before long, their expressions melted into sheepish, beaming smiles, blushing and giddy as they walked away.

“Is that how it’s supposed to go?” Alisa asked, seeking Nonoa’s opinion.

In response, Nonoa squinted her eyes as she tilted her head slightly, adding an even higher degree of blankness to her already deadpan, half-lidded gaze.

“Uhhh~… That was okay, I guess? But maybe a tad too much?”

“W-what do you mean?”

Alisa didn’t understand what she meant, but it wasn’t an unreasonable observation on Nonoa’s end. From the boys’ perspectives, they’d probably had something along the lines of “Let’s tease the cold princess a bit and strike up a convo” in mind. But, when they actually spoke to her, instead of the flustered reaction they’d expected, all they received was a calm thanks accompanied by her overwhelming beauty.

The boys, who most likely had ulterior motives of seeking attention from the school beauty, were instead thrown off guard and ended up blushing themselves. It wasn’t surprising that they felt disarmed and shy after that encounter.

“Welp, maybe it’s fine? You’ll probs gain more fans this way.”

“Oh, really…?”

I don’t really want that though…

That thought immediately came to Alisa’s mind, but considering the fact that supporters were basically the same as fans, she forced a nod, albeit a half-hearted one.

While uttering a quick, “Itadakimasu,” she reached for her chopsticks to grab some udon. Just then, a voice came from her side, separated by just one empty chair.

“…How smug of you.”

At first, Alisa didn’t realize that the remark was directed at her.

“To be summoned by the disciplinary committee and still have the nerve to smile like that…”

Huh?

But that ignorance was quickly eradicated. Glancing to her side, she met the eyes of a female student glaring at her with clear disdain. With no one else nearby besides Nonoa, it was obvious that the comment was directed at Alisa.

Summoned by the disciplinary committee…?

Replaying the words she’d heard in her head, Alisa quickly connected them to the events from this morning. The girl must’ve either seen her carrying the gifts along to the disciplinary committee office, or heard it from someone else and completely misunderstood the situation. With that in mind, Alisa carefully attempted to correct her.

“Um, I think you’ve misunderstood something… I went to the disciplinary committee office this morning because of the anonymous gifts left on my desk. I wasn’t summoned for any wrongdoing on my part.”

Her explanation lacked any provocation; she just firmly stated the facts. Yet, upon hearing this, the girl’s expression twisted with even more disgust.

“How pathetic… It’s all just a setup, ain’t it? You probably just left that anonymous gift yourself to stir up attention”

“Wha—”

The accusation was so absurd that Alisa was left speechless. The girl glared at her with malice and spat out her next words, full of scorn.

“Poor Suou-san. To have someone like you disrupting the election by playing dirty… I’m sure she’s really bothered by it.”

Bearing the front of such hostility, Alisa recalled what Sayaka had told her earlier that morning.

“Be careful. The more attention and popularity you garner, the more people there’ll be who resent you.”

So this was what she was talking about.

As Alisa thought about that, frozen in a daze, Nonoa, who’d been quietly slurping her soba, suddenly spoke up.

“You’ve been yapping for a while, huh…? But who exactly are you to be saying that?”

“…Huh?”

The girl then turned to Nonoa, clearly irritated by her unexpected interjection.

“You say Yuki’s in this pitiful position, but isn’t it up to her to decide if that’s the case? Yuki hasn’t said anythin’ herself, so why are you, someone who has nothing to do with this whole thing, complaining?” Nonoa continued in her usual flat tone as she glanced at her sideways.

“Wha—!? It’s not like I have nothing to do with it! I’ve been supporting Suou-san since junior high!”

“A supporter, hm…? So, did Yuki actually say that? That Alisa’s annoyin’ her?”

“…Suou-san’s too kind. She wouldn’t complain about something like this. That’s why I’m speaking up on her behalf—”

“So she *didn’t* say it. Then, this is all just your personal assumption, right?”

“Th-that’s not true! Everyone’s been saying it! That Suou-san is being bothered by someone like her getting in the way!” the girl’s voice grew louder as she motioned her gaze to Alisa.

At this point, others around them had already started to glance over. Unfazed by the attention, Nonoa nonchalantly lifted some soba with her chopsticks and spoke.

“Reeeeally~? So, what you’re saying is that, on behalf of this so-called ‘everyone,’ and those who don’t have the guts to complain themselves, you’ve volunteered to play the villain, hm~?”

“…I don’t like the way you put it, but yes, that’s right. If you understand, then—”

“So, who specifically?”

“…Huh?”

“Who’s ‘everyone’? You just said they told you Alisa’s botherin’ Yuki. Or is that just your imagination too?”

“Of course not! There’s… Yamaguchi-san, Zaitsu-san…” the girl stammered as she started to rattle off a few names.

Nonoa shot her a sharp sideways glance in response, her eyes narrowing.

“Welp, there you go.”

“…What?”

“You said you were playin’ the villain on behalf of those too scared to complain to Alisa’s face, amirite? In that case, you shoulda never outed them if they just intended to talk behind her back.”

“……”

The girl opened her mouth in an attempt to respond, but shut it quickly, speechless at Nonoa’s remark. Obviously, Nonoa showed no mercy by refusing to give her a chance to recover.

“Actually, this whole thing’s just ’cause you don’t like her, ain’t it? Stop using others as an excuse to justify your own selfish feelings. It’s a bother to them when you drag them into it too,” she continued casually.

Nonoa's blunt and unforgiving words slapped the girl and left her completely dumbfounded. Unable to even respond, she grabbed her half-eaten meal and stormed out in a huff. Watching her leave without so much as a glance in her direction, Nonoa spoke matter-of-factly.

"Yeah, stuff like that happens when you start standin' out. You 'kay, Alisa?"

"Ye-yeah. Thanks… I'm sorry. I didn't know what to do…"

"Welp~ you get used to it eventually, y'know~?" Nonoa told her calmly.

She spoke as if getting involved with people like that had become second nature to her.

Thinking about that possibility, Alisa was lost for words. Still, Nonoa continued, unconcerned.

"First things first: if you give even an ounce of a reaction to people like that, you've already lost. Even though it may look like they've misunderstood something, ignorin' them's the classic strat. It's one thing if they're the type that can be reasoned with, but most aren't~"

"I-I'll be careful… But, um, was that alright? You were really… painting a target on your own back on my behalf," Alisa asked in a tone full of concern, recalling the way the girl had glared at Nonoa just before she left.

Yet, Nonoa continued to eat her soba as if nothing out of the ordinary had happened.

"All's good, all's good~ Used to it. Besides, I only said what *I* thought, y'know~? Don't worry 'bout it~" she replied without a care.

"……"

Despite hearing Nonoa's reassurance, Alisa still couldn't help but feel troubled. After all, Alisa had unconsciously reacted to the girl's accusations, just as Nonoa had pointed out.

Not only do I gotta learn how to handle goodwill, I've gotta learn how to deal with malice too…

Reflecting on today's events so far, Alisa silently brought a bite of udon to her mouth. Just then, Nonoa, in her patented nonchalant tone, spoke up again.

"Anyway, seems like you had a tough time, huh~?"

"Eh? …Yes, that's right. There were a lot of presents…"

"Nope, that ain't it. I meant after your birthday party the other day," Nonoa explained, causing Alisa to freeze for a moment.

She quickly composed herself as she furrowed her brows, looking apologetic.

After returning from the Suou manor, Alisa had told the birthday guests that she'd gone to visit the lonely Yuki, bedridden with the flu. She explained that it was her way of thanking her for the birthday gift too. Though her explanation was incredibly vague and brief, maybe because of the amount of trust the others had in Alisa, no one pursued the matter any further.

Still, the fact that she wasn't questioned any further only added to Alisa's growing sense of guilt.

"Um, sorry about that. For disappearing out of nowhere…"

"Oh nah~, it's fine, really."

Just as it looked like Nonoa was about to drop the matter nonchalantly, she quickly scanned her surroundings to confirm that the attention they'd attracted earlier had dispersed. She then leaned into Alisa, lowering her voice.

"(Look, Kuzecchi left the Suou family, right? So, if he went over to Yuki's, something must've happened, dontcha think?)"

"Eh…?"

Alisa's eyes widened at Nonoa's unforeseen whisper. Seeing her reaction, Nonoa raised one eyebrow and continued,

"(Huh? Kuzecchi didn't tell you? I know 'bout Yuki and Kuzecchi's *real* relationship.)"

“Eh, r-really!?” Alisa instinctively shouted in shock, but she quickly shut her mouth.

She glanced around anxiously to check her surroundings, and after confirming that indeed no one had looked their way, she let out a small sigh of relief, her shoulders drooping slightly.

“Yeah, Sayacchi knows too,” Nonoa casually added, nodding as if it were no big deal.

“I-I see…”

A faint but distinctively uncomfortable feeling bubbled up within Alisa’s chest. It was none other than the realization that Nonoa and Sayaka had known Masachika’s secret before she did—one he’d kept from her at that. It also stirred a slight sense of distrust and dissatisfaction towards him for it.

Nonoa, reading Alisa’s feelings like a book, intentionally continued in a vague tone, “Oh~, so he didn’t tell you… Welp, don’t be too hard on Kuzecchi, m’kay~? Sayacchi and I only found out by chance.”

“…I see.”

“I mean, he’s gotta explain it to you eventually. It’s not like he’s been intentionally keepin’ away from ya.”

“……”

Even after hearing Nonoa’s reassuring words, Alisa’s feeling of unease refused to dissipate. Still, since even Nonoa was saying so, she decided to wait until Masachika was ready to explain everything himself.

“..Alright,” she nodded in agreement.

Without realizing it, Alisa was falling right into Nonoa’s trap.

“Anywho, settin’ that aside, what’s bothering you, Alisa?”

Alisa frowned at Nonoa’s question. She was unsure if she should share what was troubling her. Talking about her worries would inevitably lead to talking about Masachika’s personal matters after all. Was it even right to speak about it without his permission? Of course not; it didn’t even need a second thought.

But…

The lingering sense of unease gnawed at her heart as it eroded all her rational judgment. Originally, Alisa had never been angry at Masachika for not confessing sooner, believing he'd been keeping it a secret from everyone; not just her. In fact, if anything, she felt flattered. She thought she'd been the first one Masachika had confided in.

That's right. I thought I was the first person he told.

But if Nonoa and Sayaka had known first, the story's changed.

I mean, Nonoa-san's a friend. She even stood up for me earlier just now. And she seems to know a lot about Masachika's situation too. So maybe… it's okay to talk a bit about it.

Overwhelmed by her frustration with her partner, Alisa made a conscious decision she normally wouldn't.

"This stays between us, but…" she opened her mouth to speak.

"Yeah."

"Masachika-kun's trying to return to the Suou family, and it looks like… he can only return under the condition that he becomes the student council president."

"Oh my," Nonoa blinked at Alisa's words and tilted her head. "…Alisa, are you planning to swap positions with Kuzecchi?"

"No, it's not like that… no, actually…"

Just as she was about to instinctively deny it, Alisa froze for a few seconds. Then, as if resigning herself to what she actually felt…

"When I think about Masachika-kun's circumstances… I actually wonder if I should step down and give up the candidacy to him…" she admitted.

Looking down, Alisa stared at her half-eaten bowl of udon. Nonoa gazed upwards at the ceiling, letting out a thoughtful "*Hmm~*"

"Kuzecchi as president, huh…? Can't really picture it. Actually no, he's good with words, so maybe it'll work out better than I think."

"……"

Alisa only lowered her gaze even more at those words.

"By the way, why're *you* so hell bent on becoming the student council president, Alisa? If it's 'bout joinin' the Raikokai, then being the vice president would cut it, wouldn't it?" Nonoa looked down at her and asked.

"That's…"

Her voice faltered, and Alisa fell silent. Nonoa paused for a moment, staring at her briefly before speaking."

"Welp~, ultimately it's up to you, Alisa. Regardless, I'll be supporting you and the newly elected student council whether you get elected as its president or vice president."

Such words only deepened Alisa's uncertainty under the illusion of encouragement. Alisa set down her chopsticks and began to think about it even harder, all the while Nonoa, with eyes devoid of any readable emotion, quietly observed her.

★·☆·★

"Did I keep you waiting?"

"Nope, not at all. What's up, Ayanono~?"

After parting ways with Alisa in front of the cafeteria, Nonoa made her way to the emergency stairwell, where Ayano approached her noiselessly. As she greeted her in a familiar tone, Ayano stiffly bowed, maintaining her expressionless face.

"Good work, Nonoa-san. And… once again, thank you for your help the other day. Thanks to your advice, Masachika-sama came to visit Yuki-sama."

“It’s fine, it’s fine~. Didn’t I tell you? I’m on your side, Ayanono,” Nonoa reassured with a warm smile as she drew closer to Ayano. “Quite the ordeal, ain’t it~? Heard Kuzecchi’s thinking of returning to the Suou family.”

“Eh? Uh…”

Ayano’s eyes widened slightly as she raised her head, her gaze wavering with uncertainty.

Despite it typically being hard to read her emotions, Ayano’s reaction conveyed her emotions clearly, even to Nonoa. Her gaze carried a sense of confusion and distrust over how Nonoa could possibly come to know such intimate details of the Suou family’s affairs.

“…Did Masachika-sama tell you this?”

“Hm? No, Alisa did.”

“Eh? I… I see.”

“Yep, just now in the cafeteria.”

With that, Ayano’s budding confusion and distrust shifted toward Alisa. Coldly observing this, Nonoa clasped Ayano’s hand with both of hers.

“Anyway~, things are gonna get tough from here on out, but… you can always come to me for advice,” Nonoa assured her with a vividly beautiful smile, “No matter what happens, I’ll always be on your side, Ayano.”

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“Erm, Masha-san…”

“*Hmm~?*:”

“What’s this, some kinda hugging RTA?”

Around the same time, Masachika had been called to the student council office. He was immediately greeted by Masha, who rushed over with quick steps and hugged him the moment he entered, his gaze staring far off into the distance

“RTA? What’s that?”

“Oh, it’s short for Real-Time Attack[1]… Wait, you’re too close, too close!”

With noses almost touching, Masachika found himself under Maria’s intense gaze, making him instinctively lean back. But all that did was only give him a clearer view of her face, overwhelming him even more.

“I’ve gotta admit, Alya-san and Masha-san are super cute… I mean, haven’t they been gettin’ even more beautiful lately? They almost look out of this world at this point.”

Yuki’s words came back to him.

Now that he was able to take a closer look, he couldn’t help but feel like she was right; they’d become even more radiant. Still, focusing on that thought while being held like this made his heart race so fast that he thought even Maria would notice, so Masachika quickly averted his eyes.

“Alright, setting that aside… You need something?”

“Yeah. Why don’t we sit down for now?”

“*Haaaah*…The way you’re holding my hand so naturally is kinda terrifying.”

Just as he thought the hug was over, Maria smoothly took his hand and gently pulled him along. Her movements were so natural that it made Masachika shudder. Before he even realized it, he was already sitting on the sofa beside her. Maria then picked up the teapot and poured some tea into the cup in front of Masachika.

“Here you go.”

“Ah, thank you… I’ll have some.”

Prompted by Maria, he took a sip of the tea. As Maria watched him with a smile, Masachika furrowed his brows.

"The tea's delicious, but… what's this all about?" he asked.

"*Hmm~?* Just thought I'd pamper you, Kuze-kun."

"*Haaah*… Pamper me?"

Masachika couldn't think of a single reason as to why Maria would try to pamper him. He frowned in confusion, all the while Maria set the teapot down on the table before speaking in a casual tone.

"You had it rough the day before yesterday, didntchu? That's why I wanna pamper you."

Furrowing his brows, Masachika chewed over Maria's words for a few moments before it hit him. He then looked over at Maria's profile, which exuded a mature air to it.

"Masha-san… Did you notice…?" he asked softly.

Up 'til now, Maria had shown no signs of being aware of what had happened, nor had she brought it up. Masachika had assumed she was oblivious to the whole thing. Yet, the way she was talking now said otherwise…

"Hm, yep~… Let's see, when we were little, I remember hearing you mention having a little sister and her having a similar name, Saa-kun… Actually, I had this feeling the whole time. Kuze-kun, the way you look at Yuki-chan is just so… gentle. Like you're looking at an irreplaceable *family* member. So, I thought that maybe…" Maria spoke in a calm tone as she turned to face Masachika.

Her eyes, full of deep and intelligent light, caught him with surprise.

After a few moments, Masachika let out a wry smile, as if giving in.

"You've figured it all out… I'm impressed," he admitted.

"Hm? Does that mean I won? Yaaay, I did it~"

"No. Um, it's not 'bout winning or losing here…"

“Alrighty then. As the winner, I’ve got the right to give the loser a pat-pat on the head.”

“That’s kinda humiliating for the loser, though… Hey.”

Before he could finish his protest, Maria had already started patting his head. Masachika hunched his neck in embarrassment, unable to shake off her hand, as he looked at her with a troubled expression.

“Uh, this is really embarrassing, y’know…?”

“What’s wrong~? It’s just the two of us here.”

“It’s not about whether we’re being watched or not…”

“It’s okay. Being patted for doin’ your best ain’t something to be embarrassed about.”

“Oh boy. Looks like you’re even more carefree than usual today, huh, Masha-san?” Masachika spoke in a monotone voice.

The mature attitude she’d exuded earlier had long since vanished, as their conversation started to drift slightly off the rails.

Ignoring his remark, Maria continued to pat his head.

“There, there, you did great~,” she told him.

“…Uh, what exactly are you praising me for?”

“*Hmm~?* I dunno, but I can tell you’ve been working hard, Kuze-kun.”

“…Gotcha.”

While Masachika gave up on having a logical conversation, Maria’s gentle and soothing voice continued to reach his ears.

“I know how you feel. I know that you’ve been working reeeal hard, Kuze-kun. And how you’re always thinking about those around you with all your heart. So, it’s okay. If it’s a decision you’re making, it definitely won’t be a bad one. At the very least, I’ll always be on your side, no matter what happens.”

Taking in all her words as she gently spoke them directly to him, Masachika looked at Maria's face. He gazed into her eyes, which seemed to see through everything as they offered a warm embrace, and her endlessly kind smile. Before he knew it, a smile had naturally crept onto his face as well.

"For real?"

"Yep, for real~," Maria declared with such certainty, despite not asking for more details, and without knowing anything further.

It was a display of nothing but her absolute trust in Masachika Kuze as a person.

And strangely enough, Masachika didn't feel burdened or bothered by it. Quite the contrary, actually; he felt as if his spirits had been lifted.

"…Thank you very much, Masha-san," Masachika smiled, expressing his gratitude.

In response, Maria, still smiling, gently withdrew her hand. Then, tilting her head slightly, she spoke with a playful grin.

"Yeah, yeah, by the way. Not tryna rush you or anything, but don't forget about our promise, m'kaaay?"

At her words, Masachika's smile froze in place with a slight twitch of his lips.

That promise with Maria. It was something he could recall—or rather, it had been something that'd been lingering in the back of his mind all along.

The promise they'd made at the sports festival… to go on a very romantic date.

Such a tall order had him sneakily hoping that, somehow, she'd forget it over time. But of course, Maria remembered it perfectly. And with her smiling at him like that, there was no way Masachika could play dumb.

"…Of course."

"Yeah, I'm really looking forward to it~!" Maria cheered, clapping her hands together as she beamed with genuine joy.

Faced with her unwavering trust once again…

Huh, ain't this weird?

Masachika, who'd felt his spirits lighten just moments ago, now felt it grow heavy as it became clouded once more.

[1]: The term used to describe unassisted speedruns from tool-assisted based speedruns in the speedrunning community.

Chapter 9 - And So The Two Faced Each Other

With the commotion of opening presents in the disciplinary committee office now over, Masachika and Alisa found themselves busy with administrative tasks in the student council office.

“Prez, I’ve finished checking this batch.”

“Oh, good. Alright, just leave it over there. I’ll take a look at it later.”

“Gotcha.”

Aside from the duo, the only other person present in the room was Touya. Chisaki was still tied up with some “business” regarding the handicrafts club, Yuki had the day off, and Ayano had gone home to care for her. Maria was at a meeting with the broadcasting club, which left this rather unusual makeup.

“Hm? Kuze, could I have a moment?” Touya suddenly asked.

“Huh, did I make a mistake somewhere?” Masachika asked, looking up.

“Weeell~, yep. Right here…”

“…Ah, you’re right! I did. Sorry ’bout that!”

“Yeah, I figured. It’s kinda rare for you though, Kuze.”

“Yeah, my bad~. I’ll fix it right away…”

As Masachika returned to his seat with the documents, Alisa cast a slightly worried glance his way. He returned a faint smile to her in response. Touya then spoke up as he watched them.

“There’s no need to rush, m’kay? In fact, let’s stop for today. Li’l sister Kujou, you’re fine with finishing the rest tomorrow too, right?”

“Ah, yes. That’s right.”

“Yep, then all that’s left is to wait for older sis’ Kujou to return, and we can head out,” Touya explained, picking up his teacup as he moved to the seat facing Masachika.

Looking at both Masachika and Alisa, he spoke in a light-hearted tone, as if engaging in casual conversation.

“Well? Both of you seem kinda out of it today. Something bothering you guys?”

Hearing those words, both Masachika and Alisa froze at the same time. After exchanging quick glances with each other, Masachika, noticing Alisa’s slightly troubled expression, gave a vague nod in her place.

“Well, yeah… kinda.”

“I see… Welp, if you don’t mind, I’m all ears. I mean, I’d like to act like a proper president once in a while.”

“Is listening to other students’ concerns something that makes you a ‘proper’ president…?”

“Yeah? *Hmmm~*… Welp, let’s just say it’s the mood that matters!” Touya laughed off Masachika’s comment, waving off any concerns regarding the details.

He was likely inspired by some idealized image of a student council president. He softened his expression slightly before speaking again.

“Y’know, there’s *some* things you can’t talk about with your family or friends in the same year, amirite? Look, I’m not tryna pry, but if there’s something you wanna talk about, I’m here.”

Bearing the front of nothing but pure concern in Touya’s gaze, Masachika exchanged another glance with Alisa.

So Alya has something on her mind… Well, it’s probably my fault then, huh?

He had a faint idea of what might be troubling her, but he wasn’t certain about it. And judging by her expression, she didn’t look eager to talk about it here and now at all.

Havin' someone listen to your worries, huh…?

For Masachika, *talking* about it wasn't really a problem. After all, Alisa already knew about his troubles now, so discussing them here wouldn't be an issue. The real question was how to go about *explaining* it.

I can't just come out and say something like, "I don't really wanna be an heir or some diplomat, but is it okay for me to take the Suou family's successor position away from Yuki?" That ain't something I can honestly talk about…

Biting his lip while mulling over this predicament for a moment, Masachika slowly opened his mouth.

"This might be kind of a rude question to ask, but…"

"Oh? What is it?"

"Prez, um… Thing is, you didn't really wanna be the student council president for the sake of the job itself, right? Instead, you only did it to get Sarashina-senpai to notice you, didntchu?"

"Hm? Welp… that's pretty much it, yep," Touya nodded while gazing slightly upward.

"I'm not accusing you or anything like that, but…" Masachika clarified, albeit trailing off for a moment after that preface, "But did you ever feel… guilty? I mean, you know, for taking the position from other candidates who *genuinely* wanted to be student council president?"

"*…Hmm.*"

At Masachika's question, Touya slowly crossed his arms and leaned back in his chair, raising an eyebrow.

"Now you mention it, didn't we have a similar convo about this when you joined the student council…? Wait no, maybe even before that? 'Bout whether your motives for joining were pure or not."

"Ah… Yeah, we did. Masha-san was there at the time too."

“Yeah… Ah, yep, you’re right. Welp, as for feeling guilty… *hmm*…” Touya tilted his head and thought for a while before giving a wry smile. “Nope, to be honest, I didn’t even have the time to think ’bout anything like that when I was elected. I was just so full of this sense of accomplishment and joy… Actually, even before that, I was just running forward blindly and recklessly… I actually didn’t even really think about the other candidates.

“Aaah~… I see.”

“But I getcha, Kuze. Becoming student council president—or more accurately, getting into the Raikokai—is probably something others stake their whole lives on. So yeah, it ain’t like I didn’t feel anything about being the person who got it in the end, even though I wasn’t all that interested in being a part of the Raikokai in the first place.”

At Touya’s words, Alisa, sitting next to Masachika, raised her eyebrows slightly while straightening her posture. However, Touya didn’t seem to notice this and continued speaking.

“To be frank, becoming president… well, it wasn’t really my goal. I just wanted Chisaki to notice me, that’s all… Wait no, actually, that ain’t it,” Touya explained, looking up at the ceiling while narrowing his eyes, as if reflecting on his thoughts. “The old me… was always searching for an opportunity to change. My mind was muddled with all these insecurities; I couldn’t even *like* myself. I really hated that part of me, and I wanted to change that for a long time. So for me, that spark that set things in motion was my feelings for Chisaki.”

In response to such candid words, both Masachika and Alisa widened their eyes in surprise.

“Looking back, I guess I never really believed that this love of mine would ever come true… But, I really needed a reason to change. So, even though I knew it was a hasty act of love, I jumped at the chance. And that’s why I confessed to Chisaki almost right after meeting her—to cut off any escape for myself.”

“Eh, Prez, you really did that?”

"*Mm-hmm*. And at the time, I think I went straight to the student council office to join? Welp, that's also 'cause Chisaki made it a condition… Haha, I still remember how my hands and legs wouldn't stop shaking on the way home. That's something I'll never ever forget," Touya laughed nostalgically about the past, before continuing with a smile on his face, "But thanks to that, I really had *no* way out… From that point, all I could do was move and look forward. Looking back woulda only make me wanna quit, and looking around would make it feel like everyone was mocking me."

And what he said was truly the case. Touya had stood up on his own and started running. Of course, he had people like the former student council president and vice president supporting him, but it wasn't hard to believe that, far more than what would normally be the case, strange looks and ridicule were thrown his way.

"And as I kept running forward, little by little, I began to change… I was super happy when my efforts led me to being elected. But more than anything, my true happiness was in feeling like I could finally like myself. Sure, I mean, I ain't gonna sit here and say I feel no guilt whatsoever for getting elected for such selfish reasons. I've just… gained so much more that the guilt doesn't matter."

With an utterly bright and proud expression, Touya smiled at Masachika and Alisa.

"At the very least… not running for office because of that guilt would've meant that I would've missed the chance to change myself. I'd still be the same person from back then; someone who hated himself. That's why running for president and getting elected isn't something I regret. In fact, I'm proud of the person I've become because of it," he explained with a confident smile, looking directly at Masachika. "Kuze, I don't know what you're exactly troubled with right now. But from how I see it, you sorta tend to be… too considerate of those around you. No doubt it's a virtue, but if it stops you from doing what you want to do? Well, then the only one who'll regret it is *you*. And the people in question you're being considerate for? They aren't gonna take any responsibility for your inaction.

Masachika's eyes instinctively widened at Touya's stern yet kind words. Seeing his expression, Touya gently continued.

“I mean, ain’t it fine? To forget about inconveniencing others and run for *your own* sake once in a while. Instead of pacing the floor worried about future regrets, try running toward the future with hope. You might just create a future without any regrets for yourself.”

After saying that, Touya grinned mischievously.

“Welp, even though no one’s gonna take responsibility if you stop yourself, I’ll take some responsibility this time since I’m the one givin’ you this li’l push. If you end up regretting listening to me, I’ll at least hear your complaints.”

“*Just* hear my complaints? That’s all you’re gonna do, huh?”

“Ain’t I reassuring?”

“Wow, sooooo reassuring,” Masachika quipped in a flat tone, his voice devoid of emotion as he wore a weary smile.

Having exchanged smiles with Touya, he then quickly composed himself and bowed deeply.

“Thank you very much, Prez… That was really helpful and encouraging.”

“Thank you very much. It was a really inspiring story,” Alisa added.

“Oh, that so? Glad to hear that.”

Touya smiled graciously as his two juniors bowed at him politely. Just then, a knock on the door rang out, and the head teacher for the second-years peeked in.

“Kenzaki-kun, could I have a moment?”

“Oh, yes. What is it?”

Prompted by the teacher beckoning him, Touya left the room. A deep silence filled the room immediately. After a brief moment, Alisa softly spoke up.

“So, even without a grand reason… aiming to be elected as student council president is okay if it’s just for yourself.”

"…Yeah, seems like it," Masachika nodded in agreement.

Their eyes met, and they exchanged quiet smiles.

"…Seems like your worries have cleared up."

"Same for you, huh, Alya?"

"Yes," Alisa answered with a small laugh, before turning forward with a determined look on her face.

"I want to become the student council president for no one else but *myself*," she told him slowly and clearly, as if reaffirming her own feelings.

"I don't want to join the Raikokai. There's no reason why I absolutely have to become the student council president. And it's not like there's something specific I want to accomplish as president," she continued, explaining something she acknowledged with clarity. "But none of that matters. I'm aiming to become president because it's something necessary for *my* life. I won't hand over that position to Yuki-san, nor to you."

There was not a shred of hesitation or doubt in her voice. Gazing at her profile that shone with such resolve, Masachika looked a little dazzled. He then faced forward and spoke.

"I… I want to return to being the Suou family heir in order to change myself."

He could feel Alisa's eyes fall on him, yet he didn't turn to face her. Instead, he continued to speak truthfully, confronting his own thoughts.

"Yes, it's also to set Yuki free, but more than that, it's for *myself*. I want to regain my pride and learn to like myself again…" he explained, pausing briefly before making his declaration with conviction. "I'll take back the position of heir from Yuki."

A stale silence filled the student council office. The weight of both their declarations hung in the air, and once the lingering silence had fully dissipated, Alisa spoke.

"The path's set in stone now, isn't it?"

"…Yeah."

Initially nodding at Alisa's words, Masachika then tilted his head awkwardly.

"No, but, y'know…"

"Hm? What's up?"

"Ah, no, it's just…" Masachika replied, hesitating for a moment.

He then let out a sigh as he resigned himself, thinking that there was no point in trying to dodge it.

"I'm just wondering how I should convince Granddad… I mean, making up my mind is great and all, but he's already said he wouldn't recognize me getting elected as vice president…" Masachika explained, scratching his head in frustration.

At this, Alisa slowly spoke.

"If convincing him logically's out of the question… then maybe it's just time to be honest with him."

"Huh?"

"If logic doesn't work, you'll have to confront him with your heart… Like Prez said earlier, if you lay everything out honestly, maybe he'll understand, won't he…?"

"Reeeally~? *Hmm…*"

Twisting his whole body, Masachika voiced his doubts loudly at Alisa's fragile hope. But, at that moment, Kyotarou's words from a few days ago flashed in his mind.

"Your grandfather doesn't completely lack love for his family, y'know? He's simply thinking about us in his own way."

…Is that really true though? If there's even a sliver of hope, should I really take the chance…?

Even the head of the Suou family, renowned for his cold-heartedness, might still have feelings for his family. Maybe, just maybe, there's a chance that heartfelt words from a family member could reach him and move him.

I mean, there ain't any other way, right?

There's no way Masachika, who was limited in his persuasive abilities, could handle his cunning grandfather with just words alone. So maybe, appealing to his heart as a last-ditch effort, might actually work.

"...Alright. I'll try to have a heart-to-heart talk with him," Masachika declared with determination.

Having made up his mind, he straightened his posture. But, almost immediately, his expression darkened slightly.

A heart-to-heart talk, hm...?

Chewing over his own words in his mind, Masachika quietly lowered his gaze. A heart-to-heart talk... In other words, speaking to each other from the heart. In order to do that, he'd need to grasp his true feelings first.

He would need to dive deep into his own mind and discover the true feelings he hadn't even realized himself. That would be the first step.

My true feelings... My real emotions...

Mulling over such thoughts with his head down, Alisa's unexpected words suddenly reached his ears.

"I'm going with you, of course."

"Huuuh?!"

In response, Masachika inadvertently let out a strange noise and quickly turned around to look at her. Despite this, Alisa continued as if it were the most obvious thing in the world.

"You said it yourself, didn't you? This is *our* election campaign."

"I mean, yeah, but..."

“Besides…” Alisa said as she averted her gaze slightly while fiddling her hair in embarrassment, “I told you, didn’t I? That I’d be by your side to support you…”

In response to her words and sheepish demeanor, Masachika blinked a few times before showing a somewhat awkward smile.

“It makes me feel embarrassed too when you act all sheepish, y’know?”

“S-shut up. You were the one who said it in the first place.”

“Yeah, which is why it’s even more embarrassing for me in that sense, you feel me?”

In a cringeworthy dark history kinda way at that.

Masachika shuddered slightly as he completed his sentence in his mind. Then, turning his face forward, he began to contemplate.

Still, even if we both lay our cards on the table… would that Granddad really budge?

He’d agreed to Alisa’s suggestion since he couldn’t think of any other alternative himself, but the idea that it was enough to move the immovable Gensei…? To be honest, it just felt like Alisa, who was unaware of how stubborn Masachika’s grandfather truly could get, was being blinded with optimism.

“*Hmm~…*”

He needed something else to seal the deal.

Convincing his grandfather wasn’t going to work by just baring true feelings. As Masachika groaned over his thoughts, an audible knock rang out on the door, followed by Chisaki entering.

“Good work~! …Huh? Where’s Touya?”

She greeted them energetically, glancing around the room in confusion.

“Ah, likewise; good work too. Prez left a while ago. Got called by a teacher, I think?”

“That so? *Hmm*, just missed him, huh~?” Chisaki said while tilting her head.

As she took the seat where Touya had been sitting until just a moment ago, she then asked Masachika a question.

“So, what’s up? I heard you groaning just now.”

“…You did? Through the door?”

“Hm? Yeah.”

“…Right.”

Deciding to accept it instead of overthinking it, Masachika watched as Chisaki nodded and answered as if it were the most natural thing in the world. Look, the soundproofing in the student council office was quite solid, and he didn’t even remember groaning that loudly… But, well, this *was* Chisaki we’re talking about, so it’s probably best not to dwell on it.

“Alright… So, there’s this stubborn person I want to convince, but no matter how logically I try to negotiate, it doesn’t look like it’ll ever work… I’m just a bit stuck, that’s all,” Masachika explained in a resigned tone, prompting Chisaki to raise an eyebrow.

“If logic ain’t working here, then the only thing left is to just use brute force,” she casually responded.

“That’s quite the straightforward meathead approach.”

As Masachika uttered his trademark quips with a distant look in his eyes, a flash of inspiration suddenly struck at him. His eyes widened in realization, and slowly, he brought a hand to his mouth.

“Kuze-kun?”

“Wait a sec, Sarashina-senpai… that might actually work.”

“Huh, for real?”

“Masachika-kun!?”

Ignoring the obviously surprised look on Chisaki's face and Alisa's wide-eyed shock, Masachika dove deep into thought. With a sense of conviction, he began to materialize a plan.

Shortly after, Masachika arranged a meeting with Gensei through Ayano. He received a response just two hours later, confirming that the meeting would take place sooner than expected—right after school the next day.

★·☆·★

The next day, Masachika and Alisa, accompanied by Ayano, were driven to the Suou manor in a car owned by the Suou family. On the way, Masachika addressed Ayano, who was sitting in the passenger seat.

"Hey, Ayano."

"Yes, what is it?"

"It was a while back… but you asked me why I decided to run for student council with Alya before, remember?"

"…Yes, I did indeed."

"Did you tell Granddad why?"

"…Yes, I have."

"I see, then that's fine."

Masachika sensed Ayano's questioning gaze through the rearview mirror. Yet, he didn't bother to address it, instead choosing to focus on reviewing their plan. Soon, they arrived at the Suou manor. After getting out of the car, they were quickly escorted to Gensei's study by Natsu, who had welcomed them gracefully. There, Masachika and Alisa met Gensei for the first time in a few days.

"Thank you for—"

As Masachika was about to thank him for agreeing to meet with them so quickly, Gensei raised his hand to stop him.

“Spare the unnecessary pleasantries. I’ll also skip them on my end. So, what is it you want?” he spoke in a cold tone.

Prompted by such an order, Masachika took a deep breath as he walked toward Gensei, who was seated behind his desk. Abandoning any pretense and act, he faced his grandfather as his true self.

“I came to clear something up… and to apologize.”

“Clear something up?”

Meeting Gensei’s slightly suspicious gaze directly, Masachika continued.

“When Ayano asked me why I was running for the student council with someone other than Yuki before, I’d told her that it had nothing to do with Yuki or the Suou family,” Masachika started to make clear, only pausing to gauge Gensei’s reaction.

He saw that his expression had no visible change. It looked like Ayano had conveyed his story properly, as she had said. Confident in that fact, Masachika went on.

“That was a lie. Half of the reason I chose to run with someone else was actually to prevent Yuki from becoming student council president.”

Masachika’s true motives was something he’d repeatedly asked himself time and time again after he decided he’d run with Alisa.

Why did he choose to run with her? No, even before that—

Why didn’t he run for student council president with Yuki again in high school?

Was it maybe because of the guilt he’d harbored after having pushed aside other candidates to be elected during junior high? Absolutely, that was part of it. Still, despite that, the guilt of burdening Yuki with the heavy responsibilities of being the successor to the Suou family *alone* should’ve been far greater.

Even so, why did he then stubbornly refuse to cooperate with Yuki and continue to avoid running with her? It was a question he'd asked himself repeatedly, and the answer he finally arrived at was exceedingly simple.

"I didn't want Yuki to become the student council president."

That was Masachika's biggest motivation, something even *he* hadn't been aware of.

"Yuki becoming student council president… would obviously mean she'd join the Raikokai and, as a member of the Suou family, fulfill her life's obligations. That's a future I can see happening."

And it was a future in question he didn't want to become reality. At the very least, being the catalyst to solidify such a future was something he wanted to avoid.

He couldn't bring himself to return to the Suou family, yet he couldn't help his sister fulfill her wishes of devoting herself to the family. So, as a result, he simply chose neither and became an observer on the sidelines.

Helping Yuki in her election during junior high slightly eased the guilt he harbored toward her. And by not helping her in the high school election, he avoided the guilt of contributing to such a future for her. It was a selfish and cowardly act through and through.

"I… didn't want to witness a future where Yuki loses her freedom, being bound to her duties in this family. More than that, I wanted to see a future where Alya—no, Alisa Kujou here, could fulfill her wishes. That's why I decided to run alongside her."

"……"

Peering into the heart that Masachika had bared, Gensei gazed at him with eyes unreadable in their emotion. Then, slowly, his gaze shifted toward Alisa.

“And does the future of this young woman seem so appealing? Appealing enough to stir your heart—a heart that had grown so feeble?” he muttered, as if confirming the validity of Masachika’s claim. “Alisa Mikhailovna Kujou, was it? Why do you want to become student council president?”

To his question, Alisa stepped forward, standing proudly next to Masachika.

“Because I *want* to. Simply because I want to, I’ll become president. If there’s a place to aim for, I’ll set my sights on it. That’s how I live my life,” she declared confidently.

They were words she’d once spoken with a hint of deceit.

Yet, without any shame or hesitation now, Alisa admitted it. Her reason for aiming to become student council president was nothing more than a selfish dream.

“Up to the very top—that’s where I aim to be. I will continue to move forward diligently toward the ideal version of myself. And in order to remain on that path, I aim to become student council president.”

Aiming for the top wasn’t everything in life. It was true; there are countless other ways to live in this world, and none of them are right or wrong. That was something Alisa already knew now. It was something the boy standing beside her had taught her, after all.

But still. Even knowing that there are other ways to live, Alisa was still hellbent on aiming from the top. She simply just couldn’t stop herself from being that way. Because, in the end, that’s who Alisa Mikhailovna Kujou is.

That’s right. Masachika glanced at Alisa, who clearly expressed herself with her words and actions, and smiled. His eyes were filled with nothing but admiration, with no trace of his usual self-deprecation—a refreshing sense of joy.

“Well, as you can see… Alya is *this* kind of person. After seeing her straightforwardness and so dazzling like this… I ended up wanting to chase that dream with her,” Masachika explained with a smile. His expression then turned serious again, and he began to address Gensei once more. “I want to support Alya’s dream, and at the same time, I want to free Yuki. Instead of this closed-off future where she’s forced to become a diplomat and the head of the Suou family, I want to give her a future full of infinite possibilities. And yes, while I believe it’s for Yuki’s sake, in the end, I’ll admit it’s for *myself*. To regain my own pride, I’ll take the position of heir from her.”

Hearing Masachika’s declaration, Gensei responded with cold eyes, unchanging.

“And? Are you asking me to loosen my conditions? To let you return to the Suou family, even if you’re elected just as vice president instead of student council president?”

Do you really think I’d accept that? Gensei’s gaze practically implied. Masachika firmly shook his head in response.

“Nope, I’m not here to negotiate anything like that. Didn’t I tell you? I’ve come here to clear things up and apologize.”

And so, in the form of an apology, Masachika delivered his declaration of war.

“I’m here to apologize in advance for breaking the promise I made with you—the promise to never claim myself as Yuki’s brother.”

Masachika bowed his head as Gensei’s eyebrows visibly twitched, before forming a deep crease on his brow. Looking straight at Gensei’s now stern and clear eyes head-on, Masachika made his announcement.

“During the student council officers’ address at the second-term closing ceremony, I will publicly announce that I am Yuki’s real brother to the entire student body. I’ll also declare that I plan on taking the position of heir to the Suou family from her.”

Faced with these words, the air around Gensei grew even more fierce. Glaring at Masachika as if attempting to pierce a hole through his face, he then asked in a voice restrained like a volcano on the verge of eruption.

“Do you think I’ll allow you to expose such a family dispute to the public eye?”

Despite the threatening aura of Gensei’s gaze, Masachika, undaunted, continued to face him head-on.

“I’m not asking for *your* permission. What Yuki wants doesn’t matter here either. Regardless of what the both of you want, I will do everything it takes to take back the position of heir to the Suou family. I’ll make the entire student body of Seirei Academy, and the Raikokai, recognize that *I* am the rightful heir to the Suou family, ultimately creating a situation where you’ll have no choice but to acknowledge me,” he answered without hesitation.

It was an arrogant, audacious declaration.

In response, Gensei narrowed his eyes slightly. Lowering his head just a bit, he closed his eyes. After a few seconds of silence, he let out a sigh, dissipating the fiery atmosphere that enveloped him.

Then, with his stern gaze now softened, he looked toward Alisa and spoke in a voice that was almost calm.

“Thank you for coming today, Kujou-kun. But I must ask you to step out for a moment.”

“Ah, umm—”

Surprised by the unexpected courtesy directed toward her and Gensei’s request, Alisa instinctively looked at Masachika, clearly confused. Masachika, despite being equally flustered, gave a simple nod.

“Please, go.”

“R-right… Understood. Then, if you’ll excuse me,” Alisa said as she bowed to Gensei.

Just as she turned on her heel and was about to leave, Gensei suddenly called out to her, as if remembering something.

“Oh, that’s right. Kujou-kun, may I ask you something?”

“Eh, yes?”

Alisa turned back to face Gensei as he asked her a question.

“What is your mother’s name?”

“Eh? …Akemi. ‘Ak’ from morning and ‘emi’ from ocean.”[1]

“…I see.”

The question was abrupt, and after answering, Alisa tilted her head in confusion.

“Um, do you know my mother?”

“…A little. Nothing significant. Sorry for stopping you.”

“Ah, not at all… Well then, please excuse me.”

Sensing that Gensei likely wasn’t going to provide any further explanation, Alisa bowed once more before the door and left the study.

Now, only grandfather and grandson remained. A strong silence enveloped the room, only to be broken by Gensei after a brief moment.

“Has that girl influenced the change in you?” he asked.

It was a question with unclear intent, making Masachika a bit wary. Still, after chewing over it for a moment, he answered deliberately.

“She’s the biggest reason… but she’s not the only one. There are many others I’ve met since leaving this family who’ve influenced me as well.”

“…I see,” Gensei murmured, nodding deeply before looking up at Masachika and speaking once again, “Very well. I’ll allow you to return to the Suou family even if you’re elected as *just* vice president, but only if that girl is your partner. In return, you are to stop your plans to publicly declare yourself as Yuki’s brother, one competing for the position of heir at that.”

Surprised by the sudden compromise and command, Masachika instinctively felt a surge of reluctance within him.

“That’s—”

“Fool. Do you intend to expose not just yourself but also *Yuki* to the scrutiny of curious eyes?”

"*—Gh!*"

Those words struck a nerve. Any words of rebuttal that Masachika had reflexively formed in his head were instantly crushed, and he swallowed them with a frustrated gulp.

Seeing his grandson's reaction, Gensei looked at him with the kind of gaze reserved for someone inexperienced, letting out a sigh.

"Are you dating that girl?" he asked out of nowhere.

"Wha—!?"

The unexpected, almost gossip-like question from his characteristically strict grandfather completely threw Masachika off. Still, Gensei's eyes were nothing but serious, and it only deepened his confusion.

"No, we aren't like that… Wait, I mean, it's none of your business in the first place!"

"What an idiot. How could it not? We're talking about someone who could very well be the future wife of the possible head of the Suou family."

"*Gh!* T-that's a huge leap!!" Masachika cried out.

His voice, filled with both frustration and disbelief for his grandfather's incredibly serious but outlandish remark, reverberated throughout the study.

★·☆·★

"Well then, please excuse me."

Having said this and bowed, Alisa stepped out of Gensei's office, carefully closing the door behind her. She turned toward the hallway, letting out a small breath—

"…Ah."

"……"

—Or so she intended, but her eyes met Ayano's, who'd been waiting in the hallway, causing her breath to catch in her throat.

"…Has the conversation ended?"

"Y-yes, for now… It looks like Masachika-kun still has something to discuss, though."

"Is that so?" Ayano said, nodding slowly. Her trademark expression was unreadable as she tilted her head slightly. "If it isn't inconvenient to you, Alisa-san, would you like to visit Yuki-sama?"

"Ah, u-umm."

Alisa started to nod, before realizing the possibility that Gensei might call her back. As she hesitated in mid motion, Ayano, who looked to have read her concern, spoke.

"I'll remain here and wait. If Master calls for you, I'll come to notify you. Please don't worry."

"Ah, really? Then… could I ask you to do that?"

"Leave it to me."

"Alright then, I'll go and visit her… Unless if I'll be a bother?"

"It's no bother at all… I'm sure Yuki-sama will be delighted. Please, this way," Ayano reassured her as she started walking.

With Alisa following her down the hallway, they eventually reached Yuki's room. Ayano proceeded to knock on the door three times.

"Yuki-sama, are you doing well? Alisa-san has come to visit you."

"Come in."

Despite Alisa's concern that Yuki might still be recovering, all she heard was her relatively lively voice in response to the knock.

"Please, after you."

"Ah, yes… Sorry for the intrusion."

As Alisa stepped through the door that Ayano had opened, she immediately met Yuki's gaze. She was standing by the window, bathed in the light of the setting sun.

"Ah, welcome, Alya-san. Thank you for visiting me," Yuki spoke with a faint smile, forcing Alisa to catch her breath.

The figure of Yuki she'd witnessed the other day, resembling a vulnerable child.

The more mature and usual appearance she showed to the world.

Both these sides of her had seemed to blend together in the twilight, making her outline hazy.

Standing there before Yuki, who now seemed almost ethereal, to the point where reality itself seemed to have thinned, Alisa found herself speechless.

Seeing this, Yuki tilted her head slightly, still smiling at Alisa, gesturing towards the chair with her hand.

"Please, have a seat."

"Ah…"

Alisa, who'd been somewhat dazed by the atmosphere that Yuki had exuded, snapped back to herself and cleared her throat softly.

"Thank you… but I'm fine like this."

"Is that so?"

"……"

Realizing that it was obvious she was being overwhelmed, Alisa tried to regain her composure again. Still, her mind couldn't keep up with the composed aura that enveloped Yuki, and the only thing that came out of her mouth was something safe and polite.

"Y-you seem to be doing better than I expected, that's good."

"*Fufu*, thanks… But that's not really what you wanna say, is it?" Yuki chuckled softly, speaking as if she could see right through her.

Alisa, driven by a sudden surge of rivalry against her electoral opponent, quickly straightened her expression.

"I heard from Masachika-kun… That you're his little sister."

"Yes, seems like that's the case," Yuki admitted without showing any signs of being shaken, nodding as she lowered her head slightly. "I'm sorry, Alya-san. I had my reasons, but I've deceived you."

"No, no, deceived is too strong of a word here…"

Alisa, more shaken by Yuki's choice of words than Yuki herself, fumbled for a response.

She cleared her throat again as if to reset the mood in the room.

"L-look, I was definitely surprised… but you had your reasons, right? Plus, it's not like I was the only one kept in the dark… So, let's just leave it at that."

At Alisa's forgiving words, Yuki raised her head and gave a faint smile.

"*Fufu*, Alya-san, you really are kind and wonderful, hm?"

"W-what's that supposed to mean? Geez…"

Suddenly embarrassed, Alisa averted her gaze and twirled a strand of hair around her fingers. Yet, as if regaining her senses, she quickly stopped and cleared her throat once more.

"Well, I know I practically said it's fine… but I want to hear more from you."

"More…?"

"Yes… Now that I know you're Masachika-kun's sister, I want to have a proper conversation with you," Alisa spoke clearly with direct words.

At this, Yuki turned her gaze towards the window, squinting at the setting sun.

Still draped in a somewhat delicate but ephemeral aura, she then slowly stepped away from the window and sat down in a chair, nodding.

“Yes I… I also have something… I want someone to hear.”

Hearing Yuki’s use of the first-person pronoun[2] which likely reflected her true self, Alisa caught her breath.

Without looking at her, almost as if speaking to herself, Yuki began to tell her story.

[1]: Alisa's mother's name is spelled with "暁海" (would sound like "Akatsukiumi" literally) in kanji but pronounced as "あけみ" (Akemi). "暁" (akatsuki) means "morning" or "dawn," while "海" (umi) means ocean, meaning that her name literally means "morning ocean."

[2]: Yuki initially uses "わたくし" (watakushi) which is a more elegant/graceful form of referring to oneself with "私" (watashi). Hence the "Yes I... I," with the first I being the former and the second I being the latter.

Epilogue - So I Became Myself

It's a memory now hazy in the distant past, from when I was still really young.

Still, I can easily recall how unbelievably mischievous of a troublemaker I was.

I'd scribble with markers all over the house, escape and run outside whenever it was study time, only to bring back bugs or balls of mud I'd made. I would even often throw them at my nii-sama, just to see his surprised reaction as I laughed and clapped my hands in excitement.

I was such a hopeless brat. I was constantly scolded by my grandfather, yet both my parents and nii-sama were always kind to me.

"Do whatever you want, as long as you're not bothering anyone. It's okay to be a little nuisance to your family," my mother used to always say, never once denying me. And even though I always ran away from studying and extracurricular lessons, she would forgive me and let me have my way as long as there was something else I was passionate about.

"Hey, now ain't that great?" had become my father's favorite catchphrase. Whenever I made a mess or pulled any pranks, he would never fail to let his immediate reaction be anything other than a praise with that line of his.

"Is that a lion? You drew it really well, Yuki. Seems like you've gotta knack for art too. It's just… kinda unfortunate that it's on the wall, huh?"

When I told him that it was because I needed a wall to draw something big, all he did was laugh it off with a, "That's right." And a few days later, he brought home a big whiteboard just for me. After that, I stopped drawing on the walls.

“Oh, geez. Can’t help it, huh~?” Nii-sama would always give me a troubled smile at my pranks, all before finding the time to play with me. It made me very happy, so I continued playing all kinds of tricks. Even so, he was always nothing but kind to me… and that didn’t change, even after I collapsed from asthma.

“Looking energetic today, Yuki. Alright then, let’s play cards together.”

It would’ve been perfectly expected for him to resent a little sister who did nothing but lie around, drawing all our parents’ attention. But nii-sama remained as nii-sama, and I loved him very much for that.

“Oh, woulda look at the time. Well then, see you later, Yuki. I’ll be back again.”

“Yeah… C’ya.”

Now that it was difficult for me to go outside, I started spending my days cooped in my room. It was only then did I realize how packed nii-sama’s schedule was every day, and that the reason everyone had only turned a blind eye to my carefree attitude up ’til then was because… *he* was working hard.

“Nii-sama… Aren’t all those lessons hard for you?”

“Hm? That’s not the case, y’know? More importantly, look, it’s your turn, Yuki.”

Yet, no matter how tough things were for him, nii-sama never let it show in front of me. He thought that the sick li’l Yuki had it so much harder than he’d ever will, after all. So, he always wore a smile in front of me.

And it wasn’t just nii-sama. My grandfather was busy with his duties as the head of the Suou family, my father dedicated to his work as a diplomat, and my mother preoccupied herself with supporting both my father and nii-sama.

Then… what ’bout me?

What can I *do for this family…?*

Those thoughts were all I could mull about as time dragged on with nothing I could contribute to. And when my asthma got really bad, I'd even sometimes think, "What would everyone think if I were to just die like this?"

My family and our servants might grieve, true; but… maybe, somewhere deep down, they might feel relieved to be free from some kinda burden. And as for everyone else, they probably won't even notice if I were gone. Here, in this room, without accomplishing anything, all I'd do is fade away, unnoticed by anyone outside. That thought filled me with a terrifying kind of dread.

I want… to do something too.

It was my first real desire—doing something for this family. I wanted to go outside and do something that people would remember, yet my body wouldn't let me. So… at the very least, I decided I'd keep on smiling; just like nii-sama always did in front of me. To avoid clouding my own family's smiles, I put on a smile as though everything was okay, even if reality was tough or painful.

And strangely enough, it actually made it start to feel okay. From there, I learned first hand that even lies and acts could become real if you carried them through with brute force.

But at some point, nii-sama's smile appeared to look even more and more strained. And with that… my mother's smile began to disappear too.

Things became even more awkward between the two of them. And on the day when nii-sama's piano fell completely silent, I somehow knew that my mother and nii-sama wouldn't be able to stay together anymore.

"Masachika and I will be living somewhere else… Yuki, what would *you* like to do?" my father asked me.

I struggled to answer. The truth was, I really wanted to shout, "Why? I want us all to stay together!" with all my might.

But… when I thought of my mother and nii-sama, who no longer smiled like they used to, I couldn't bring myself to.

I loved them both so much. I wanted them to be happy again. So, I…

"I'll stay in this house. Father, please… make nii-sama smile again, okay?"

…Answered like that. And when I did, my father gave me a smile with an expression that looked like he could burst into tears before pulling me into a hug. Just this once, he didn't say his usual, "Now ain't that great?"

"Mother! Please read me this book!"

With both my father and nii-sama having left, I tried my hardest to bring back my mother's smile.

Even though I knew something happened between her and nii-sama, I continued to play ignorant and clung to her with all my innocence. With a smile as pure as an angel, I pretended I knew nothing about the dark or ugly things that'd happened. And, little by little, she began to smile again like she used to. Around that time, my asthma started to improve, and I was finally able to move around freely.

Yes! Now I can do anything! All the things I couldn't do before—I can do them all now!

With that thought, I felt ready to try everything.

I actually didn't really like studying, and the lessons I had to take for my extracurriculars were a mixed bag—none of which I could do as well as nii-sama at that. But still, I felt a sense of accomplishment when doing them. I felt happiness in being able to do something for my family, in producing results that left an impression on others.

As I gradually grew up and finally felt that I'd managed to take on nii-sama's role, I decided to visit him after a long time. Just like how nii-sama had once always worked hard on my behalf, I was now doing my best in his place.

You don't need to worry about things here anymore; I'm doing well. You can finally rest easy.

That's what I wanted to tell him. Yet—

“It’s been a while, Yuki… Glad you look well. You’ve really grown up.”

As I greeted him as gracefully as I could, all nii-sama did was return a stiff smile and averted his gaze.

And no matter what I did after that, he never smiled at me like he used to.

Ah, all I’m doing is just making him feel guilty…

I suddenly realized that one day.

Nii-sama thought that his actions had forced the change in me. He believed that I had no choice.

So the more I worked toward perfectly embodying the role of a proper successor to the Suou family, the more it strengthened nii-sama’s sense of guilt, and the more he blamed himself.

“Nii-sama, I have a present for you! Hold out your hand!”

“Hm? Okay.”

“Here—a cockroach! Just a toy, though!”

“*Ahaha…*”

When I even tried pranking him like I did when I was little, he just forced a smile and looked away without the genuine laugh he used to show.

Why? How’d it end up like this?

It wasn’t meant to be like this. All I wanted was nii-sama to regain his smile. And yet… the more I became the capable, “good girl,” the darker his expression became. *If that’s the case, then maybe… maybe I should—*

—Become the silly li’l sis again.

Exactly like when I was just a hopeless troublemaker. I wanted to become so foolish again that nii-sama wouldn’t help himself but laugh. No, I *will* become that.

So that nii-sama could laugh again, so that he'll pay attention to me again.

I'll become a sister so silly it'll be exasperating. An overly cutesy one to the point of almost looking fake.

"How… do I even become a cute li'l sis? Huh? Oh wait, that reminds me of this anime…"

From there, I began researching cute little sister characters online.

The anime and manga I found were filled with all kinds of "little sister" tropes. I started imitating them, creating a new face for myself.

"'Nii-san'… is kinda stiff, isn't it…? Should I go with 'onii-chan' instead? No, how 'bout 'onii-chan-sama'? Or maybe 'ani-ja'[1]? No, that's pretty strange, huh? Well, guess I can just try things out and see… I, no… maybe *I* instead? Or should I just go all out and say ***I*** instead?[2] *Hmm* how's that sound?"

As I got into the process, I inadvertently became completely hooked onto the world of 2D characters. It was a perfect conversation starter with nii-sama too.

"Alrighty~, I'll introduce this manga to nii-sama next time… no, onii-chan-sama. *Fwahaha*, prepare yourself, my beloved onii-chan-sama~!"

It's fine even if it looks painfully fake. It doesn't matter if he sees through my act. I'll just stick to the lies and this whole performance, and I'll turn it into something real.

So please…

Please smile and say "Can't help it, huh~?" just like you used to.

Smile, okay? My beloved nii-sama.

で、
オレが生まれたってワケ

Illustration translates to “So, that’s how I was born.”

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[1]: Another way of referring to your older brother, with “兄” (ani) meaning “older brother” and “者” (ja) conveying familiarity or affection.

[2]: There are three general ways to refer to oneself in Japanese.

私 (watashi わたし, atashi あたし): A neutral and polite way to refer to oneself (“atashi” being the more feminine/softer variant), used in the most formal of settings.

僕 (boku ぼく): Generally used by males in more informal contexts. Is more casual than “watashi” but is still modest.

俺 (ore おれ): Very informal and masculine to refer to oneself. Most commonly used among close friends or in very casual settings. Can come off as rough and arrogant when used inappropriately.

Here, “I” represents “あたし” (atashi), “*I*” represents “僕” (boku), and “***I***” represents “俺” (ore).

Anecdote - The Heart Of A Cold Man

When I was six years old, on the day I first appeared at a social gathering, I became aware of how people around us perceived my family.

“Oh look, that’s Suou over there… So he’s returned to Japan, huh?”

“That boy standing behind him—is that his eldest son? I think this might be the first time I’ve seen him…”

“That’s right, I believe this is his first public appearance. His name was… was it Gensei? But still, to see both parents showing no concern at all for a child as young as him… It’s impressive, isn’t it?”

“He doesn’t seem to mind it in the slightest either… He really seems composed, but there’s hardly any trace of youthfulness in him. As expected of that family…”

Extremely competent yet cold-hearted—that was how the Suou family was seen by society. My father, the head of the family, embodied this reputation to perfection.

“Our family has protected and supported this country for over eight hundred years. As sons born into the main family, you are public figures by birth. You must always remain aware that your very own existence is for the public; never, ever indulge in personal gain,” Father told us.

He was always flawless, wrapped in the pride and duty of the Suou family’s head, leaving no room for error for himself. Naturally, he expected the same for both me and my younger brother.

“Gensei, you forgot Inoue-sama’s name earlier, didn’t you? Remembering people’s faces, names, families present, and the recent affairs of attendees is a basic requirement in social gatherings like these. Forgetting someone’s name is unacceptable. Don’t let it happen again.”

Following Father's footsteps, Mother was highly competent in social settings too, though she remained cold toward her own family. From birth, I'd never once received any parental affection from my parents. Yet, I held no particular dissatisfaction or questions about it.

Even if they weren't kind, they were both individuals worthy of respect—everything they said was always correct. I respected my parents and took pride in living up to their expectations… though it seems my brother didn't feel the same way.

"Nii-san, doesn't it ever feel difficult for you?"

"What do you mean?"

"Well… about how our father and mother are always lecturing us… I mean, everyone in my class is always talking about how their moms and dads go shopping or play with them."

"That's how it goes for regular families, isn't it? We're Suous; that has nothing to do with us. And stop talking in such a pitiful, hesitant way."

My younger brother was an outstanding person—capable enough not to disgrace the Suou name. Yet, he was a soft boy. He was weak-willed, timid, and always constantly watching the expressions on either mine or our parents' faces. His attitude to me—someone mediocre at best despite being born the eldest son—was irritating and frustrating.

If you hate being lectured, then why don't you make an effort to avoid it? Unlike me, who lacked talent, he could easily meet our parents' expectations if he tried. How could he ignore his own lack of effort and then voice complaints about them?

I'm sure my brother had inherited the Suou family's excellence, while I was only left with its coldness. My parents were perfect leading figures of the Suou family, yet they were not blessed with an heir who could meet their standards.

"The heir will be the one who builds connections at Seirei Academy and secures a place in the Raikokai."

Because of that, it was only natural that Father had set such a condition in order to determine the next head of the Suou family. Perhaps… he saw through the inadequacies of both my younger brother and me, and had maybe even considered the possibility of choosing a successor from a branch family.

“Do you think our father hates us?”

It was around this time that my brother began to frequently express his anxieties and feelings of dissatisfaction. Maybe it was his way of relying on me as his older brother. Still, I couldn’t empathize with him, and all his grumblings and trivial complaints only stirred annoyance in me.

“Being liked or hated has nothing to do with it. As the head of the Suou family, it’s only natural for Father to be preoccupied with choosing the most suitable successor. If you don’t want to be hated, then why not try harder to meet our parents’ expectations?”

Responding to him with such cold detachment, my brother gradually stopped coming to me with his concerns. Instead, he took on an increasingly rebellious attitude toward our parents; even running away from home several times. Despite that, I simply dismissed his behavior as typical adolescence and focused my mind on studying. Unlike that younger brother of mine, excelling in even the most *basic* of classes at Seirei Academy required relentless effort on my part, especially when I was preparing myself for a career in diplomacy.

Yet, despite being otherwise naturally inferior to my brother, I did have one strength.

The ability to recognize other people’s talents. Simply looking at someone else’s face and expression was enough for me to tell if they had a good head on their shoulders. I could sense their physical abilities just from observing how they acted, and could even determine if they were trustworthy or reliable by just talking with them. By going further and getting close to them, I could even perceive what kind of unique abilities someone might have and where they might best thrive.

This single talent was enough for me to easily gain allies at school. I would provide promising people with opportunities to excel, regardless of family they were from or the gender they were, while ousting those who'd held influence without any merit. Being someone born into a prominent family yet lacking any natural talent, I held no prejudice to anyone based on their familial background, and it worked to my favor.

"I am who I am today thanks to you, Suou-san!"

"It was you, Suou-san, who recognized my potential when everyone else ignored me. I'll gladly follow him to the ends of the earth!"

"You've been a great benefactor to me, Suou-san. Please, reach out anytime; I'll prioritize any request from you."

Before long, I had a pool of capable individuals gathered around me. Supported with nothing but their respect and admiration, I managed to secure my place in the Raikokai after graduating from high school, despite my own mediocrity.

"Well done, Gensei. You've achieved results worthy of the Suou name as my eldest son. I hereby acknowledge you as my official successor."

"Your mother is proud of you. You've grown into an admirable man. Please continue to meet our expectations from now on, okay?"

From as far as I could remember, it was the first time my parents had praised me so openly. Facing such recognition from my strict parents filled me with joy and pride. Laying the foundation for becoming the next head of the Suou family, I entered university and continued my studies in diplomacy while simultaneously expanding my own network. I fostered ties with as many talented people as I could, invested in them when needed, and steadily built up my influence within the Raikokai. With all of this going on, I even participated in a few arranged meetings my parents had set up to find a suitable partner for when I become a diplomat.

Everything seemed to be progressing smoothly—at least if I ignored my younger brother's now near-complete absence from home. That was of course until a contagious disease began to spread in a certain country where Father was posted.

One night, I received an international call from Father. He informed me that Mother had fallen gravely ill, unconscious due to that contagious disease, and that he, too, had contracted the same illness. The sudden news threw me into confusion and near-panic, yet all Father did was scold me over the phone…

"Get a hold of yourself, Gensei! All your agitation's going to do is no good! It serves no purpose! What you must do now is fulfill your duty as a member of the Suou family."

It felt like lightning had struck me at that very moment. I gasped and regained my composure, listening attentively to as many instructions Father could give me before hanging up, saying he still had to inform his subordinates and colleagues. Despite his wife literally hovering the fine line between life and death at the time, and with his ownlife in jeopardy, he remained an unwavering public figure to the end.

"I'll leave the Suou family in your hands when I'm gone, Gensei."

Those were the last words I heard from him. Just hours later, his condition worsened as well, and he passed away on foreign soil almost simultaneously with my mother.

Upon hearing of our parents' deaths, my brother broke down in tears.

But I did not cry.

"Get a hold of yourself, Gensei! All your agitation's going to do is no good!"

Such were the words from Father, someone who remained resolutely a Suou to the very hand. They lingered in my head. I knew that if he was here right now, he'd definitely chastise me for crying. All he'd do would be to tell me to fulfill my role as a member of the Suou family. So, I didn't cry. I simply carried out what was necessary as the new head of the Suou family.

Despite the instructions Father had left me when he was still alive, I remained extremely busy for a while. Given the cause of their deaths, it was especially challenging to bring my parents' remains back to Japan. In spite of that, I eventually managed to hold the funeral without incident. After that, I spoke with my brother for the first time in a long while.

"As head of the family, there are responsibilities I must handle, but there are some aspects I simply can't manage alone. I'll need your help with those," I requested.

In my response, all my younger brother did was grimace.

"No way."

"What?"

"I said no way, didn't I? Why do I have to help you, big bro?"

My brother's attitude had changed over the past few years at this point in time, and he spat out these words in a rough tone. Surprised by his unexpected defiance, I responded calmly.

"…Even if you're not the head of the family, you're still a Suou. With our parents now gone, don't you feel any sense of duty to work for this family?"

"*Because* I'm a Suou? Work for this family? I don't care about that—those are your values, not mine!"

Then, as I stood there utterly taken aback, he unleashed everything he'd been bottling up over the years.

"I'm sick of it! I'm sick of this family, I'm sick of all of you!" my brother shouted. "Our father didn't even leave a single word for me, his own son, even on his deathbed! I wasn't expecting any family warmth at this point, but… seriously, he really was a worthless parent. But still, a parent is still a parent! It's only natural for their child to feel sad when they die. It's normal to cry! And yet! You didn't even shed a single tear at the funeral! All you ever talk about is 'the family' or 'for the sake of this household'… Do you even have a heart at all!?"

I was left unable to respond. Glaring at me, my younger brother turned on his heel.

“If you’d offered me even a single word of comfort when I was crying… then *maybe* I’d been willing to help you. But forget it. I’m leaving. I don’t want any of the inheritance. Do whatever you like with it.”

And with that, he left the manor. I was at a loss for words to say to him, so all I could do was simply watch his back as he walked away.

With even my brother now gone, I was left alone, and the days passed in a blur of work and my responsibilities to the family. Yet, I couldn’t shake his parting words from my mind.

“Do you even have a heart at all!?”

Maybe, my younger brother was right—I didn’t have a heart. Now that I think of it, I’d never been kind to him. I respected our parents, but if you’d asked whether I truly loved them or not, I wouldn’t be able to say for certain.

…No, I probably didn’t love them. If I did, as my brother said, I’d have shed at least a tear at their funeral.

“Suou-san, is it true you turned down all your marriage candidates?”

That was a question my university friends had asked me at a café I frequented, where I was catching up with them after a busy period of work.

“…Yes.”

“Huuuh~!? Why’d you do that? I mean, that top scholar from our uni, Ousaka-san, was even one of them, amirite?”

“I heard the daughter of the Kujou family was among them too! And you rejected all of them?”

“That’s right.”

All my friends could do was let out disbelieving exclamations as their jaws dropped at my simple answer.

It was true—each of the candidates had flawless familial backgrounds, and each of them would've been a capable and ideal partner as the wife of a diplomat. But… in each one I saw the same kind of marriage my parents had—loveless. Up until now, I'd thought that would've been fine.

But then…

What if our child turns out like my brother? Would I fail to give them love or kindness as a parent, and then just watch them silently as they leave?

Once that thought crossed my mind, I couldn't imagine marrying any of them.

The woman who'd become my wife… What she needed wasn't a distinguished background or exceptional talent, but—

"Here we are~, thanks for waitin'~. Three hot coffees and one espresso~!"

One of my friends raised an eyebrow at the woman who'd brought over our drinks.

"Oh, wait, huh? You that new waitress?"

"Yes! Just started workin' here last week! Looking forward to serving you all from now on~," she said with a cheerful smile.

At first glance, she wasn't someone you'd call beautiful on the spot—she left a rather ordinary impression.

"Um… this isn't actually what I ordered…"

"Oh, ah! I-I'm so sorry!"

And on second glance, she seemed not *just* ordinary—rather, she was downright dull-witted. And yet… I found I couldn't take my eyes off her.

At first, I simply thought it was because I was used to being surrounded by highly capable people, and that she was a refreshing change of sight. Yet, even after our initial encounter, I kept finding myself drawn to her, returning to that café time and time again, sometimes even by myself.

“Ah, Suou-san, you’re back again today~”

“…Yeah.”

As we became familiar faces, we’d chat idly whenever the place was quiet. Yet, my impression of her remained unchanged.

“For that reason, it’s said that future relations with those developing nations in that specific area will be crucial.”

“Reeeally~? That so~?”

“…Did you understand any of that?”

“*Hmm*~~. I kinda get it sounds tough?”

A woman lacking in sharpness, knowledge, and refinement. Yet, she never failed to wear a smile and always listened to me intently, even to what must’ve clearly been dull conversations to her. She was gentle and kind to everyone, and she never uttered a single word of complaint or criticism about others.

“That’s called love, Suou-san” my friend, Kimishima, told me one day.

“Kimishima… The hell are you saying?”

“No, no, I’m right, aren’t I! Think about it! You’re always finding yourself wanting to go see that waitress whenever you have the time, don’t you? And you can’t help but watch her, right? That’s love, Suou-san.”

Love. I hadn’t thought such a feeling existed in me. And yet… somehow, with her, I felt like I could build a household with a touch of humanity. I felt that unlike my parents or myself, she would shower her family with warmth and affection.

“…*Hmm*. Kimishima, tell me—how does one go about courting a woman?”

“Eh? …W-whaaaat!? Um, oh, well, right, let’s see… uh, I think giving gifts is a good idea! Something she’d be happy to receive… And a bouquet, I guess? If a guy’s gonna ask a woman out, I think the classic move’s to dress sharply in a suit and hand her a big bouquet of red roses…”

“Hm, I see.”

Following my friend’s advice, I prepared as many gifts as I could think of.

Jewels, bags, hats, purses—all things my previous marriage prospects had enjoyed. Frankly, I couldn’t quite picture her finding joy in these kinds of gifts, but I didn’t even *know* what she liked to start with. So, I prepared as many as I could carry.

Along with a large bouquet of red roses, of course.

The sheer volume of the gifts ended up being more than I’d anticipated, and ultimately, I ended up having one of my friends help carry them all.

“No, seriously, this is way too much, Suou-san! You’ve got enough presents for an entire year here!”

With my friend stuffing both his hands with bags as he voiced his complaints, we headed to the usual café. As we arrived, I immediately handed the bouquet of roses to her, who was staring at us wide-eyed in confusion.

“I want you to marry me.”

“…*Fueh*? Ehhhhh~~~!?”

“Hu-huuuuh~~~!?”

Naturally, her and my friend’s jaws both dropped in utter shock. The owner of the café even got angry with us, complaining that the roses’ scent was too strong and to take it outside.

Yet, for some reason, my impulsive proposal had worked, and we became engaged.

Turns out, she basically knew nothing about my family’s background. So, when I invited her over, she was once again astonished. And after I explained in detail about the Suou family and its history, she reached the point where it looked like her head was about to explode.

“U-um, aren’t I outta place here…? I mean, I don’t know how to talk to important people, I don’t know any proper etiquette, and I definitely have no idea ’bout dealing with foreigners…”

“None of that matters… All I want from you is to build a warm, loving home with me,” I hastily reassured her just as she seemed to realize she’d married into quite the family.

“Huh? Is that really alright?”

“Yes, that’s all I ask.”

“Then, I’ll be just fine~. I absolutely love children!”

Seeing her say that with a bright smile, I knew I’d made the right decision.

And even as she became my fiancée, then my wife, and eventually the mother of our children throughout the years, she never changed. She always maintained her smile and listened earnestly to all my dull stories, delighting more in simple flowers than in luxurious gifts.

“But, we’re really starting to run out of vases, huh~?”

“*Hmm…*”

She stroked her large belly gently with a slightly troubled smile in the hospital room.

“…I’m sorry. I just don’t know any other way.”

I didn’t know how to make a woman happy, so I always resorted to giving her the bouquets that I knew she loved.

“That’s easy. Just look into my eyes and say, ‘I love you’,” she said, smiling at me.

“That’s…”

I can’t say it.

Those were words that felt like something someone like me, who lacked a true heart, shouldn’t say so casually.

“I like you,” “I love you.”[1] Both were phrases I felt would sound insincere if they came from *my* mouth. I could never bring myself to say them.

“*Geeeez*, you really are so awkward, aren’t you~… Ah, I know!”

Seeing my furrowed brow as I moved my gaze down, she perked up, as if she'd just had a great idea.

"From here on out, whenever you wanna show your love or gratitude, just go to the florist's and bring me one *single* flower—whatever you think is the most beautiful that day.

"...Just one is enough?"

"Yep. And, let's see~..." she started, pausing to pat our sleeping young son beside her and her own large belly. "For these children, give them a heartfelt gift for them every year on their birthdays. And one day, when they share their dreams with you—support them wholeheartedly."

"*Gh*... That's..."

Supporting the dreams of my children with everything I had. Maybe, as a parent, such a line of reasoning was a given. But as the head of the Suou family, it was something I couldn't promise lightly. What if my children pursued careers other than diplomacy? Who'll carry on the Suou name? The more I chewed over her words, the more it was harder to agree so easily. But, despite being faced with my troubled expression, she gave a carefree smile.

"If it ever comes to it, I'll put my best foot forward 'til we finally get a child that says they want to become a diplomat~" she declared.

"H-hm!? I-I understand. W-we'll go with that then..."

"Good, then it's a promise, m'kay?"

"...Yes, it's a promise."

"Yay, I feel relieved now. I'll raise these kids with all the love I have," she told me with a smile as she gently stroked our son and our unborn child within her. "So please, do what you need to do. Because I love you for who you are."

Those words—her smile—never faded from my memory. Even on that day.

"Dad! It's Mom!"

One day, a call brought news of a family tragedy.

If I fly back to Japan now, I might make it in time. I might be able to hold my wife's hand in her hospital room and maybe even bring her back from the verge of death.

But—

"Do what you need to do. Because I love you for who you are."

"Get a hold of yourself, Gensei! All your agitation's going to do is no good! It serves no purpose! What you must do now is fulfill your duty as a member of the Suou family."

Her words, Father's words—both of them echoed in my mind. The following day, I was scheduled to attend an important meeting involving national defense matters.

"…!"

I agonized and hesitated over a stretch of a few, long seconds. And yet—

"Take care of your mother. I'll head back as soon as my meeting is over."

I chose to be Suou. By the time I finished all my scheduled arrangements and returned to Japan, my wife had already passed away.

"Motheeeeer…~! *Uuu~, waaaaaaah~!*"

"*Guh… kuu… sniff.*"

As expected, I really must not have a heart.

Even as I looked at my wife's silent, lifeless body in the hospital, and even as I watched my son and daughter break down in tears beside her, I shed no tears of my own. I simply did what was expected for me as the head of the Suou family.

But there was no denying that what I felt was an indescribable sense of loss. It was as if the faint spark of humanity that had just *begun* to bloom inside me had been completely extinguished at its core.

And that loss only became more definitive when my son died in an accident. In an attempt to escape from such a hopeless sense of loss, I threw myself even more deeply into my duty as the head of the Suou family."

"Father! I'm going to become a diplomat. I'll become one and take over onii-sama's place as the heir to the Suou family!"

My daughter shortly began saying things like that after my son's death.

But I had made a promise with my wife.

"I will not ask that of you."

Besides, as far as I could see, my daughter did not harbor any talents to become a diplomat. It'd be cruel for me to expect her to fulfill the same role as my now-deceased son, especially when she'd been born with even less talent than *I* had.

"Don't even *think* that you can even *begin* to replace Naotaka. What I want from you is to bring a suitable husband into the Suou family. As long as you can fulfill that duty, you may do as you please."

Still, despite my intentionally harsh words, my daughter gave up her dream of becoming a pianist and pursued becoming a diplomat.

If that's her choice, then so be it. I decided to let her do as she wished, at least until she was satisfied. With that now in mind, I focused on my work abroad.

However, a year later when I returned to Japan to celebrate my daughter's birthday, just as I had promised my wife, I was stunned.

I was finally able to see my daughter again. Yet, her cheeks had turned gaunt, her eyes losing their sparkle. The daughter I once knew and last faced a year ago was completely different to the person standing in front of me right now.

Really, what had I been doing? All I had done was continue to devote myself entirely to my duties as the head of the Suou family and as a diplomat. And when I even learned that my daughter would oftenly sleepwalk aimlessly at night, all I did was leave it to the doctor, never checking on her *myself*.

There was no one left in this household to offer my daughter any kindness or love.

“You’ve lost quite a bit of weight, haven’t you?”

“No, I’m alright.”

“…I see.”

And yet, even at this moment, I was still at a loss of words to say to her. The only way I knew how to show any kindness was the way my wife had once taught me.

Yet, at the very least, I tried to spend more time in Japan. But that was all I did. I couldn’t say anything, and felt that any words I spoke would only push my daughter further into a corner.

“Kimishima… I was thinking of assigning a servant to Yumi… Do you have anyone suitable in mind?”

“A servant, hm? If you need one, then…”

“I don’t care about how efficient they are at work. Instead, can you think of anyone who can approach her with kindness and affection?”

“If that’s what you’re looking for, then, if I may be so bold, how about my wife? She’s already acquainted with your daughter, and ever since our son moved into the dorms, she’s had a lot of free time on her hands.”

“I see… then, can I ask her to?”

“Yes, I’ll talk to her about it.”

In the end, as always, all I could do was rely on those capable of doing what I couldn’t. It was no different from the days I left my children in my wife’s care. And so, as I immersed myself in work again, one day, my daughter brought home a boy.

“Nice to meet you, I’m Kyotarou Kuze. I’ve had the privilege of dating Yumi-san for the past month now.”

Even at first glance, I could tell he was a young man brimming with nothing but pure potential. And… just like my wife and son, he was someone who could treat my daughter with kindness and affection.

“Yumi, I’d like to speak with him alone. Please step out for a moment.”

We were then left alone in my study.

“I’ve already heard about the Suou family from Yumi-san! So, in order to gain your approval for our relationship, I intend to become a diplomat!” the boy, looking nervous, spoke.

“That won’t be necessary.”

“Eh…?”

“The only thing I ask of you is… to give Yumi—to give my daughter—kindness and affection.”

And with that, I bowed my head.

“Please, I beg you.”

“Eh, h-huh!? Please, raise your head!” the boy frantically responded, before smiling as he continued, “Even so, I still want to become a diplomat. I want to become someone worthy of Yumi-san, even if just a little.”

True to his word, the boy went on to become a remarkable diplomat, growing into a reliable, upstanding young man.

And as he became my son-in-law, together with my daughter, they had two children. As expected, my two grandchildren were both brimming in potential; but this time, like my wife and son, they were kind and loving individuals.

“……”

The cold, emotionless Suou family had slowly changed. Through the hands of my wife… and her children.

Yet, amidst it all, I was the only one who remained unchanged. Even since that day, the day I chose to be a Suou instead of a husband… I remained the same, heartless man. By that point, even if a human heart had once started to stir within me, it was too late for me to change.

If I hadn't been a Suou, I could have been there when my wife passed away. If I hadn't been a diplomat, then my son might not have lost his life.

And despite knowing all of this, I still remained a Suou, still remaining a diplomat to this day. So how could I ever become a father who loves his daughter, or a grandfather who loves his grandchildren? If I couldn't be a husband who stood by my wife's side then, or a father who loved his son, how could I now?

I will live as a Suou until the very end… and die as a Suou.

There was no other choice for someone like me. That's why, even when my grandson—just like my younger brother once did—tried to leave the family, I acted not as a parent or a grandfather, but as the head of the Suou family, adhering strictly to what was right.

"That's not all though, is it? Father-in-law, didn't you push Masachika away because you wanted to give him complete freedom? To let him live without being bound to the Suou family?"

Even as my kind son-in-law said such things, I knew that he was just overestimating me. I simply did what was right as the head of the Suou family. Kindness, affection… Those were things that didn't exist within me.

No matter how far I go, I will always still be a Suou… A foolish father, and a terrible grandfather.

★·☆·★

In a cemetery lined with countless graves, there stood Gensei in one corner.

Before him was a gravestone—neither particularly large nor extravagant, the kind you might find anywhere. It wasn't the type of grave you'd expect generations of the Suou family to be buried in. Underneath this grave rested only two people: his wife and his son.

“Masachika… your grandson—and your nephew, Naotaka—returned after quite some time. He brought a daughter of the Kujou family with him,” Gensei spoke with his usual calm expression and resolute tone. “I heard a while back that the youngest daughter of the main family had once eloped. Now, it seems that her granddaughter is classmates with my grandson. She’s a girl with ambitions and a strong will—perhaps like her grandmother.

With that, he let his expression soften, a faint smile forming at the corners of his mouth.

“Maybe it’s because of her influence that Masachika came right out and declared war on me… For some reason, it even reminds me of when Yumi brought Kyotarou home for the first time,” Gensei spoke with a faint hint of amusement.

But he only let it show for a brief moment as he then let his smile fade, gazing quietly into the distance as he murmured.

“You were right after all.”

As such words drifted away along with the wind, time passed before Gensei turned on his heel.

“I’ll come again.”

With those words over his shoulder, he walked away alone.

Before the gravestone watching his retreating figure, a single pink orchid swayed in the breeze.

[1]: “好きも” (sukimo) directly translates to “I like you” while “愛してるも” (aishiterumo) directly translates to “I love you.” However, in the context of couples/love interests, they can both mean “I love you” here, with the latter having a stronger meaning; usually only used between married couples.

Afterword

Hello, SunSunSun here, the guy who said the 9th volume would be released at the same time as the artbook back in July, yet didn't make it in time at all. Well, I totally messed up… I can only say I underestimated it. I didn't anticipate the increased workload from the anime adaptation.

Eh? You mean the anime adaptation really adds that much work for the original author? Like, aren't you just meant to be overseeing some script or something? …Haha, great question. Honestly, I've always thought the same thing myself—then I actually became someone whose work was being adapted into an anime.

Like, when I saw novels or manga have their release schedule slow down after getting an anime adaptation, I always wondered, "Does the original author really get *that* busy all of a sudden? Don't they just attend a few meetings here and there?"

Alright then! On behalf of all those novelists and mangakas whose work have been adapted, and are still facing the same suspicions from readers, lemme explain! Here's the kinda new work we get when an anime adaptation begins!

First, there's the script meeting. We sit down with the anime director, producer, and the rest of the anime production team to discuss the script written by the screenwriter. We talk and discuss things like "This scene will be too long for the runtime, so let's cut it," or "This part's too static, let's change it up," or even "In that case, I'll write a new scene myself," or "This part here ain't passing broadcasting ethics." This happens multiple times for each episode. It never wraps up after just one or two meetings. Based on the opinions shared in the meetings, the screenwriter revises the script, and then we meet again, repeating this cycle until the script is complete. Of course, since these are meetings, I have to read through the script in advance and prepare my opinions as the original author.

In parallel with these script meetings, there's also the process of selecting the cast—the voice actors. The first thing we do is a tape audition. Okay, I know it's called "tape," but it's actually just an audio file. Voice actors perform a few scenes excerpted from the original work, and those audio clips are sent to us. Regarding Roshidere, we received about 80 audio clips for each main character. That's right, lemme say that again—80 people. I had to listen to all of them and pick out a few candidates who stood out and made me go "This person's great!"

Of course, receiving so many entries meant that a lot of people wanted to be part of Roshidere, and as the original author, it made me really happy… But to be honest, listening to that many entries eventually caused a Gestaltzerfall (albeit a misused one). I gradually lost track of what made for a good performance. Some of the audio files were over six minutes long, so listening to them all thoroughly made choosing just *one* character a literal half-day task. So, for the initial narrowing down, I judged by the tone of the first line. Even then, it still took me a few hours to narrow it down to the final three to six candidates.

Once I, as the original author, picked a few good candidates, we had another meeting to decide who would move on to studio auditions. And after listening to the studio auditions, we selected the final voice actors for each character. Honestly, the tape audition was much tougher than the meetings themselves… Of course, I couldn't be there for the whole thing, so for the supporting roles, I left the task of narrowing down the final few candidates to the anime production team. I only participated in the meetings where we'd choose the one final actor. One phrase someone said during one of them, "Ah, this ain't right. This Takeshi has hair," really stuck with me. Yeah, the voice actor playing Takeshi was definitely too cool for him, but the comment about having hair was way too funny.

So, that's how it went basically. While I know I used the word "meeting," they actually weren't particularly stiff. They were kinda chill, actually. Of course, this depends on the workplace, and how much the original author is involved in things like casting choices probably varies as well. In Roshidere's case, I got the impression that the anime production team really took the original author's opinions into account, even when it came to casting decisions. But still, since I'm an amateur when it comes to anime production, I naturally left the final decisions to the production team. That said, I think they did an amazing job casting voice actors that perfectly matched the characters!

With that wrapped up, after finishing the casting selections and script meetings for all twelve episodes, the next step was recording the voiceovers. This takes about two and a half to five hours per episode, and you do it twelve times. As the original author, my participation in this wasn't mandatory, but I attended every session except for one, which I couldn't make. Of course, I did all of this remotely. What I've described so far is likely what most people imagine when they think of an original author's role in overseeing an anime adaptation.

Still, to be honest, this anime-related supervision isn't all that much of a burden. You need to prepare in advance, but the meetings and voiceover sessions themselves only take up a few hours at set times, a few times a month. You might be thinking, "It sounds tough, but isn't it just once a week or every other week? Doesn't seem that busy," and you'd be right.

Yes… while these aspects of overseeing the anime production are important, they're not the main source of pressure. The biggest burden for the original author is… actually, the projects. That is, merchandise, collaborations, and event-related work.

First, we receive proposals. Things like, “We want to make these kinds of goods at our company” or “We want to hold this kind of collaboration event at our shop.” These proposals come in different formats—sometimes PowerPoint, sometimes Excel—but since they’re official business documents exchanged between companies, they’re always pretty solid. I go through them to make sure there’s no problem from the original author’s perspective. Of course, KADOKAWA’s representative checks everything thoroughly beforehand, so there’s rarely anything I need to comment on. At most, I might ask the representative a few questions. Honestly, it feels like I’m some old-school boss just stamping documents one after another.

In these projects, there are often cases where new anime illustrations are commissioned, and when that happens, we get requests for each character to be drawn in specific outfits. I review those requests to ensure the costumes align with the characters’ overall image and personality. Next, I check the rough sketches based on those requests, followed by the finalized illustrations. Naturally, I review everything at each stage.

Once the illustrations are done, we receive product mockups showing how the merchandise will look with the new illustrations. KADOKAWA’s representative would’ve usually done a thorough check at this point, so I rarely encounter anything odd and say things like, “Hey, something’s off here.” Still, precisely because they’ve been checked, I need to confirm whether the checked content is okay. For example, I’ll get reports like “We’ll correct this color because it’s too light” or “The name’s misspelled, so we’ll fix it,” and in those cases, all I need to do is confirm the changes. But, if it’s a question like, “How about we change the character placement here—what d’you think?” then I need to provide a proper response.

And after all of that, once a new illustration is completed… you know what happens next? Dialogue. There's sometimes dialogue that needs to go with it. It could just be lines for a social media post or for a short video. New lines to match each character's illustration. And who comes up with them? Well, of course, that's my job as the original author. Yeah, but it's still manageable—it's just a single phrase after all. The real issue is… when it's for Roshidere's video game, the amount of dialogue increases exponentially. After all, I have to supervise all the lines the characters speak in the game. Naturally, that doesn't mean I write all the lines from scratch myself. The game development team provides drafts for the lines, and I oversee them. But to be honest, there are many times when I think, "Alya wouldn't say something like this," or "Yuki would say it more like this." So, every time that happens, I come up with new lines, and that itself is quite a heavy burden.

Then, once all of that supervision is finally over, and the project is nearing completion… there's still more. Now comes checking the website design for the release and the promotional tweets. If they ask the voice actors to help with the promotion, I also have to check the scripts for that.

All these project-related matters are sent to me every time there's some sort of development. Especially with Roshidere, there's… apparently been an abnormal number of projects even before the anime aired. It's both a delightful scream and a near-constant one. I should mention that my editor had kindly once offered, "If the workload is too much, we can adjust things for you." But, considering these projects are a rare opportunity, and it would make no sense to reject them because "the original author is too busy to review them," I couldn't accept it. I mean, the projects themselves are really appreciated by you guys—it's hard to turn them down, right? Sure, I could just leave the reviews entirely to KADOKAWA's representative and take the more laissez-faire approach, but as the original author, there are some things I'm particular about…

And, let's not forget, on top of all this, I've also got work related to the manga adaptation. As a result, almost every day during the week, I'm getting contacted about something—be it the manga, the anime, or the various projects. In fact, if a whole day goes by without any messages, I start to feel restless on my own.

…I don't think I've ever outright stated this in an afterword before, but… I'm just a part-time author, okay? I work a regular company job during the day on weekdays. Every time I mention this, people are always surprised and ask, "Wait, why haven't you quit your job yet?" That's a long story in itself, and I don't want to sound pretentious, so I'll skip it for now.

So, I go to work during the day, you feel me? And after a long day of working, I'll come home only to work on manga, anime, or project-related tasks, y'know? But after that, I'll be like, "Ah, you've worked brilliantly today too, SunSunSun," and I'll get this weird sense of accomplishment, even though by this point, I wouldn't have even written a single new word in the manuscript of the actual original work. Then, before I know it, I'm doing other things—like browsing the web or playing games. You get it, right? This is what happens to adults without any sense of planning. But seriously, when I write novels, it takes me a while to get into the flow, so even if I have just over an hour, I can't get that much done. In the end, the constant need to review something every day was overwhelming, so I had the projects batched up for the weekends, which made things much more manageable.

And so, as I was being overwhelmed by the workload that came with the anime adaptation, the July release got pushed to August. Then, the August release got pushed to September… I caused a lot of trouble for the editor and Momoco-sensei. I really am sorry. Speaking of the two of them, I also messed up with the short story I was supposed to write for the artbook… At first, my editor asked me, "Would you prefer 4,000 characters over two-pages or 8,000 characters over four?" and I answered, "4,000 characters, because 8,000 is too long for an SS." I then proceeded to… turn in a manuscript with 13,000 characters. Am I stupid, or something?

So, not only did I exceed a single page, I went beyond three… And as a result of forcing it into two pages, the text was so small in the final product that it was honestly hard to read. Well, if I could make one excuse, when I initially said "4,000 characters," I had planned to write the SS featuring Alya in the white one-piece dress from the cover of the artbook. In that case, I thought 4,000 characters would be more than enough.

However, after seeing the illustration of all the heroines in their dresses… I thought that it was just *too* good. I really wanted to write about that instead. There are nine heroines, right? Naturally, all of them had to appear. And then I also included four male characters, including Masachika. So that's 13 characters in total. If I allocate 1,000 characters per person, doesn't that make 13,000 characters pretty reasonable? No, it's not reasonable at all. Honestly, I can't thank the editor and Momoco-sensei enough for laughing and forgiving me.

By the way, here's the shocking fact—Takeshi and Hikaru weren't included among the four male characters. For those of you thinking, "Wait, what?" right now, I'm guessing you haven't bought the artbook. I understand though, it's quite pricey. But seriously, it's amazing. Momoco-sensei's illustrations viewed in artbook page size are breathtaking. They're flawless down to the tiniest detail, and it's overwhelming. You'll find yourself sighing in awe.

Hm? Oh, you're curious about which four male characters ended up in the SS? Come on, you can probably guess if you think about the named male characters, right? First, there's Masachika and Touya. If Takeshi and Hikaru aren't there, obviously Yuusho makes an appearance. And the last one? Yes, it's Andou-senpai. Everyone's beloved Andou-senpai. He's actually the first named male character to appear in Roshidere. Andou-senpai, the guy who had a conversation with Alya before Masachika in the first episode of the anime. And yet, he never got another chance to appear after that—a true one-off character, that Andou-senpai guy. But now, he's made his triumphant return in the artbook! If you're curious, go ahead and buy it. And that concludes my completely unsolicited promotional pitch.

Oh, speaking of overshooting character limits, I also messed up with the bonus novel for the anime's Blu-ray/DVD. At first, the project proposal I got from the editor said, "We'd like you to write a bonus novel of around 50 to 100 pages." Now, 50 pages is roughly a li'l over 20,000 characters, and 100 pages is around 45,000 characters. Considering a typical light novel is about 100,000 characters, that's a lot even for a bonus. It's about ten times the length of the SS I usually write for store bonuses. So, I thought, "That's a bit much, could I keep it to a max of 50 pages?" The editor negotiated with the anime team for me, and they agreed, which I was incredibly grateful for. I was really impressed by their negotiation skills—no wonder they used to be in sales!

And then I handed in a manuscript with… 96,000 characters. Am I really this stupid? It's like I set up my own downfall. The page count? Well over 200 pages—basically a full light novel. Let me say it again—it was practically a light novel, based purely on the word count.

So, has anyone realized it yet? The SS I wrote for the artbook and the Blu-ray/DVD bonus novel together add up to nearly 110,000 characters. What I'm discretely tryna say is… over the past seven months, I've written the equivalent of two light novels' worth of content. So, that long-winded explanation I wrote over seven pages earlier? That wasn't a story about how anime-adapted authors get busy, but rather a tale of how humans manage to pull through when pushed to their limits.

Well, in my case, it didn't work out in the end, so the 9th volume's release got delayed by two months… But what I'm trying to say is… yeah, my editor is a saint.

Even when I greatly exceeded the planned character limit, my editor just laughed and forgave me—they really are a saint. They didn't complain at all, even when the release date got delayed, and adjusted the whole schedule for me—they really are a saint… But seriously, I've been relying on them way too much, and I need to be more careful. I feel like if my current editor gave up on me, I'd be done for.

That's why, at the signing event to celebrate the release of the artbook, I brought some sweets as a small token of appreciation and an apology to my editor. I also gave some sweets to Momoco-sensei, both to thank them and to celebrate the release of the artbook. In return, I got an autographed colored illustration.

Hm?

How strange… What's with this situation where I've become some kinda barter king…? This completely ignores the principle of equivalent exchange… Actually, this was close! If I hadn't prepared those sweets, I would've become that shameless author who scored a signed illustration for free!

So, if you're gonna meet people you're usually indebted to online, make sure to bring a gift! …No, seriously (deadpan face).

The first time I went to an offline meet-up, I showed up empty-handed and felt incredibly awkward… It was bad. Everyone else brought gifts, and there I was, just receiving them with a sense of guilt. Well, it's not like the others expected anything in return, and no one said anything like, "Huh? You came here empty-handed?" But even if they didn't mind, I definitely did.

Listen up! This is a message to all offline meet-up beginners! When you go to an offline event, especially when you're meeting someone in person for the first time, make sure to bring a gift! Something that's not too bulky, easy to carry, and won't spoil if you carry it around for a while. Also, if the person lives far away, it's even better if you bring something that's unique to your hometown. Consider this advice from someone who's made the mistake before!

Oh, and while I'm at it, here's a tip for aspiring novelists! When you create your autograph, make sure it's mainly composed of curves! Whatever you do, don't use too many straight lines! If you do, then messing up even a li'l will make it obvious, and you won't be able to hide it! This is a warning from someone who's already past the point of no return!

…Wait, what was I talking about again? Ah, right—it's the story about my editor being a saint and Momoco-sensei being a god. I'm always so grateful to them. Please continue to look after me. Seriously, I beg of you—please continue to look after me. Really, please.

…Now that I've just written whatever came to mind, I realize that I only have three pages left. And I still haven't talked about the event in Thailand or the afterparty for the anime recording. Ugh, once again my lack of planning shows. Oh well, let's speed things up.

First, back in April, we had that event in Thailand… Something related to books, or something? It was a really big event, and I had the opportunity to hold a signing session there. Just like in Singapore last time, I was once again joined by Sumire Uesaka. This time, though, we traveled separately, so we were only together on the day of the signing. She was as beautiful and friendly as ever. And the fans in Thailand were so passionate! Since they all spoke Siamese, I needed a translator, but everyone was so eager to talk during the signing session.

After the signing ended, I went to check out the KADOKAWA booth, and I saw Sumire Uesaka buy a 3D oppai mousepad of Alya with her own money.

It was a shock. I was so stunned. “You’re buying that!?” I asked, “I’m gonna write about this in the afterword of volume 9, you know!?” She just smiled and said, “Go ahead~” So, here I am, writing about it. I’ll really do something I say, god dammit.

For those who don’t know what an oppai mousepad is, I don’t have the space to explain it here, so go look it up yourselves. It’s a very gentlemanly item, so search at your own discretion.

After that, we went to a Thai restaurant for the afterparty, and I had Thai Crab Curry, which was incredibly delicious. When I mentioned I was going to Thailand, a friend from my university days recommended it, so I specifically requested it. It was unlike anything I’d ever eaten before. If I had to describe it… well, I’m not sure how to explain. It’s a curry made with crab meat and eggs, I think? It wasn’t particularly spicy, nor did it really taste like curry… but one thing I can say for sure is that, while I’m neither a huge fan nor hater of crab, that dish was amazing. So, if any of you ever go to Thailand, be sure to try it! Alright, that’s the end of the Thailand story!

Next up, let’s talk about the afterparty following the completion of the anime recording. After we finished recording all twelve episodes, I got to attend an afterparty with the anime production team and the cast. It was pretty much my first time speaking with the cast members other than Sumire Uesaka (I guess I did briefly chat with Takuya Eguchi during the first recording sesh, though?). Everyone was incredibly friendly and kind. They all said that the recording sessions for Roshidere were filled with fun and that the entire team got along well. As the original author, hearing that made me so happy. Roshidere is definitely a series that has been truly blessed with its contributors, now including the anime production staff. I’m deeply grateful for that. And now, I’d like to move on to expressing my thanks to all these wonderful people.

First, my editor Miyagawa-sama, who I've troubled so much once again this time around. Thank you so much for everything. Next, Momoco-sensei, who created another set of fantastic illustrations, following the artbook. I requested a lot of expressions this time, including some serious and nervous ones, which were a bit unusual, but you delivered with your usual stunning quality—I was truly moved. Then, there's Tenamachi-sensei, who continues to produce captivating manga adaptations without missing a beat. Now that Ayano has made her appearance in the manga, all the student council members are finally here, and I'm excited to see what kinds of interactions will be depicted next!

Lastly, to editor Suzuki-san, who handles the manga adaptation, editor Iwata-san, who's in charge of the artbook, Kato-san, who oversees merchandising, Arai-san, the anime producer, the entire promotion team, everyone at Doga Kobo, all the cast members, and everyone involved in the production of Roshidere—as well as every reader who has supported Roshidere—I send you my gratitude, so deep that not even the Grim Reaper could reap it. Thank you all so much!

I'll see you again in the afterword of the next volume!

『口シデレ』
よろしくお願いします。

Fan Translator's Note

Yo. Thanks for reading our fan-TL of Roshidere Volume 9! We hope you enjoyed it as much as we did. Feel free to take the time to rate the series on Novel Updates if you did!

I'd like to express my gratitude to Ikea, Darrk, and AmadCSK for editing and proofreading, and Indi for helping us with editing and typesetting the colored illustrations.

Anyway, this was a pretty good volume for me—I'm really liking how Sun^3's really picking up the pace. Hopefully we'll see some more things happen in Volume 10.

I also invested way more time into translating this volume compared to prior ones. Particularly, I spent obscene amounts of time on the dialogue to make sure the characters are more personalized/actually sound like how they are (at least more compared to previous vols).

I'll catch you guys in Volume 10. Feel free to check the other series we fan-tl too (you can check them on our website)!

Feel free to join our discord server for updates and brainrot.

As always, please support the author by buying the official translation!

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